Protests, Prices and the Peasantry

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Mobilising around 'Agrarian Crisis' and Suicides in Vidarbha, India

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Abstract

Critical research on farmers in the global South often studies them as victims of global neoliberal policies. The present research is instead interested mainly in the agency of farmers who are surviving the increasingly difficult agrarian situation in the global South. It studies how they articulate their concerns and how they organize themselves to try to improve their living conditions. Taking the region of Vidarbha in Central India as a case, this thesis analyses how farmers mobilize around the 'agrarian crisis' and the widespread phenomenon of farmers' suicides. It specifically looks at how they try to make sense of the current situation of agriculture, how they mobilise, and how they attempt to find strategies to challenge the seemingly unreachable forces of the market and the state. This research is conceptually positioned at the intersection of the (perceived) material conditions of people and the frames and strategies they use in their movement activities. A qualitative methodology is combined with an analysis of secondary statistical data and academic literature.

The movement at the core of this thesis consists of a number of small groups and activists who organize varied forms of collective action around the 'agrarian crisis' and is therefore distinctly different from earlier peasant and farmers' movements. These groups persist on a low level of activity, but their set of actions encompasses a wide range of activities, from agitations on the road to establishing shops for their products. While the groups are very diverse in many respects, most of the movement actors raise similar demands, most importantly for higher prices for agricultural products. They all bring forward the issues of farmers, namely of small and medium farmers engaged in capital-intensive, groundwater-based, commercial agriculture in semi-arid zones.

The way that farmers and activists frame their analysis of the present situation suggests a fine-grained, differentiated understanding of the 'agrarian crisis' as a web of structural inequalities and risks (such as price risk or droughts). The farmers' abilities to cope with these risks depend on how these different inequalities convey the effects of the crisis on what is often understood as the 'peasantry'. The thesis proposes four frames of the movement actors' visions and ideas for a future of agriculture. This allows for an analysis of the tensions that occur among the groups and that are immanent in all the groups' main demand: a better price for agricultural produce. But movement actors tend to hold on to the idea of a 'peasantry' and of an eventually capitalist development. However, the tensions in their visions show that there is instead a need for new ideas and thorough analysis to resist neoliberal capitalism while avoiding falling back on a romanticized 'united peasantry'. When this can be achieved, the resistance of farmers can provide more than short-term support for the richer section of the 'peasantry'.

The research finds that a successful mobilisation strongly depends on the trustworthiness of the activists and that constructing this trustworthiness is marked by a perceived contradiction: an activist is seen by his or her (potential) supporters as trustworthy if he or she is honest and able to achieve things. In the eyes of the movement actors, the latter can be achieved mostly by being close to the powerful or

involved in (electoral) 'politics'. But this puts the first component of perceived trustworthiness at stake: the reputation of honesty, because 'politics' is perceived as dishonest. Only if the activist stays away from electoral politics, he or she is perceived as an honest leader of the movement sphere, but again less able to achieve things. The small groups along the spectrum of this heterogeneous movement cannot compete with the established political parties in terms of achieving things. Therefore, the activists' reputation of honesty becomes their main mobilizing argument to distinguish themselves from the established political parties. Such movement groups then have the potential to mobilize people outside the arena of electoral politics, but they also face a limitation in forming mass alliances as a counter-hegemonic force against the politics of neoliberalism.

Finally, this thesis shows how the discourses around farmers' suicides, as well as various levels of engagement with them have become an important part of the activism in Vidarbha. The suicides can even be understood as a component of the movement, which is characterized by a certain lack of power and by the difficultly to capture the new realities of farmers stranded between the new neoliberal policies and older forms of oppression such as caste. In India, as well as in other countries, the discourse around (farmer) suicides opens up a space to talk about the implications of capitalist agriculture and particularly neoliberal policies for farmers, and thus the darker sides of the dominant development narrative.

Zusammenfassung

Kritische Forschung zu BäuerInnen im globalen Süden untersucht diese oft als Opfer globaler neoliberaler Politik. Vorliegende Arbeit hingegen fokussiert auf die Handlungsmacht derjenigen BäuerInnen, die im zunehmend schwierigen landwirtschaftlichen Umfeld des globalen Südens überleben. Behandelt werden die Artikulation ihrer Anliegen und wie sie ihren Kampf für verbesserte Lebensbedingungen organisieren. Am Fallbeispiel der Region Vidarbha in Zentralindien wird analysiert, wie BäuerInnen die ‚Agrarkrise' und das verbreitete Phänomen der Bauernselbstmorde nutzen, um politisch zu mobilisieren. Die Arbeit beleuchtet, wie Bauern versuchen, die jetzige Situation in der Landwirtschaft zu verstehen, wie sie politisch mobilisieren und Strategien entwickeln, um die scheinbar unerreichbaren Kräfte von Markt und Staat herauszufordern. Diese Forschung positioniert sich konzeptuell am Schnittpunkt zwischen den (wahrgenommenen) materiellen Bedingungen der Menschen und den Bezugsrahmen und Strategien, welche die BäuerInnen und AktivistInnen in ihren Aktivitäten innerhalb der sozialen Bewegungen nutzen. Die qualitative Methodologie wird kombiniert mit einer Analyse sekundärer statistischer Daten und akademischer Literatur.

Die soziale Bewegung im Zentrum dieser Arbeit besteht aus mehreren kleinen Gruppen sowie AktivistInnen, die unterschiedliche Formen von kollektiver Aktion zum Thema der ‚Agrarkrise' organisieren. Sie unterscheidet sich damit deutlich von früheren Bauernbewegungen. Diese Gruppen bestehen auf einem tiefen Level von Aktivität fort, aber ihre Aktionen sind sehr vielfältig und gehen von explizit politischen Aktionen auf der Strasse bis hin zum Aufbau von Läden für ihre Produkte. Die einzelnen Gruppen sind in vieler Hinsicht sehr unterschiedlich, aber ihre Forderungen sind sich häufig sehr ähnlich. Die wichtigste ist ein höherer Preis für Agrarprodukte. Sämtliche AkteurInnen unterstützen die Anliegen von BäuerInnen, genauer gesagt von kleinen und mittleren Bauern, welche kapitalintensive, grundwasserbasierte und kommerzielle Landwirtschaft in semi-ariden Zonen betreiben.

Die Bezugsrahmen, welche BäuerInnen und AktivistInnen für ihre Analyse der jetzigen Situation benötigen, legen ein feinkörniges, differenziertes Verständnis der ‚Agrarkrise' als ein Netz von strukturellen Ungleichheiten und Risiken (zum Beispiel Preisrisiken und Dürren) nahe. Die Fähigkeit der BäuerInnen, mit diesen Risiken umzugehen, hängt von den strukturellen Ungleichheiten ab, welche die Auswirkungen der ‚Agrarkrise' auf diejenige Kategorie beeinflussen, die oft als ‚Bauernschaft' oder ‚Kleinbauerntum' verstanden wird. In dieser Arbeit werden die Visionen und Ideen, welche die AkteurInnen der Bewegung hinsichtlich der Zukunft der Landwirtschaft hegen, in vier Bezugsrahmen gruppiert. Dies ermöglicht eine Analyse der Spannungen, welche innerhalb der Gruppen bestehen und die immanent sind in der Hauptforderung der Gruppen nach einem besseren Verkaufspreis für ihre Agrarprodukte. Die AkteurInnen der sozialen Bewegung tendieren dazu, an der Idee der ‚Bauernschaft' und einer schlussendlich kapitalistischen Entwicklung festzuhalten. Die Spannung in ihren

Visionen weisen jedoch klar aus, dass neue Ideen und eine genaue Analyse der Situation nötig sind, um gegen den neoliberalen Kapitalismus Widerstand leisten zu können – ohne in die romantisierende Kategorie der einheitlichen ‚Bauernschaft' zurück zu fallen. Wenn dies erreicht ist, wird ein Widerstand von BäuerInnen möglich, der mehr erreichen kann als eine kurzfristige Unterstützung für die reicheren Teile dieser ‚Bauernschaft'.

Die vorliegende Arbeit zeigt, dass der Erfolg der Mobilisierung stark davon abhängt, wie die (potentiellen) UnterstützerInnen die Vertrauenswürdigkeit der AktivistInnen einschätzen. Der Versuch, diese Vertrauenswürdigkeit aufzubauen, ist gekennzeichnet von einem wahrgenommenen Widerspruch: Eine AktivistIn wird von den (potentiellen) UnterstützerInnen als vertrauenswürdig erachtet, wenn er oder sie erstens ehrlich ist und zweitens fähig, etwas zu erreichen. Aus der Sicht der AkteurInnen der Bewegung scheint letzteres vor allem dadurch zu gehen, dass der oder die AktivistIn gute Beziehungen zu mächtigen Personen hat oder aktiv ist in der institutionellen Politik. Aber das setzt die erste Komponente der Vertrauenswürdigkeit aufs Spiel: Den Ruf von Ehrlichkeit, denn ‚Politik' wird als unehrlich betrachtet. Nur wenn sich der oder die AktivistIn von der institutionellen Politik fernhält, kann er oder sie in der Einschätzung der UnterstützerInnen eine ehrlichere AnführerIn der Bewegungssphäre bleiben – wird aber wiederum nicht als fähig wahrgenommen, Dinge zu erreichen. Die Gruppen im Spektrum dieser heterogenen Bewegung sind klein und können nicht mit den etablierten Parteien konkurrieren, wenn es darum geht, Dinge zu erreichen. So wird die Reputation der AktivistInnen bezüglich deren Ehrlichkeit zum wichtigsten Mobilisierungsargument. Sie erlaubt es den Gruppen, sich von den etablierten politischen Parteien abzugrenzen. Solche Gruppen haben damit das Potential, Menschen ausserhalb der institutionellen Politik zu mobilisieren. Gleichzeitig sind sie kaum in der Lage, der Politik des Neoliberalismus grosse Allianzen als konterhegemoniale Kraft entgegensetzen zu können.

Schliesslich zeigt die Arbeit auf, wie die Diskurse um die Bauernselbstmorde sowie die Auseinandersetzung damit auf verschiedenen Ebenen zu einem wichtigen Teil des Aktivismus in Vidarbha geworden sind. Die Suizide können sogar als Komponente einer sozialen Bewegung verstanden werden, die charakterisiert ist durch einen Mangel an Macht und durch die Schwierigkeit die heutigen Realitäten von BäuerInnen zwischen neuen neoliberalen Politiken und älteren Formen von Unterdrückung wie beispielsweise das Kastensystem zu verstehen. Nicht nur in Indien, sondern auch in anderen Ländern öffnet der Diskurs um (Bauern-)Selbstmorde einen Raum, um über die Auswirkungen der kapitalistischen Landwirtschaft und insbesondere der neoliberalen Politik auf BäuerInnen zu reden – und somit über die dunklere Seite des dominanten Entwicklungsnarrativ.

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List of Abbreviations

AIKS	All India Kisan Sabha
BJP	Bharatiya Janata Party
BKS	Bharatiya Kisan Sangha
CACP	Commission for Agricultural Costs and Prices
CM	Chief Minister [of Maharashtra State]
Congress	Indian National Congress
CPI(M)	Communist Party of India (Marxist)
DNT	Denotified Tribes
GM	Genetic Modification
GoI	Government of India
GoM	Government of Maharashtra
HYV	High Yielding Varieties
KAA	Kisan Adikar Abiyan
MGNREGA	The Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act
MLA	Member of Legislative Assembly
MP	Member of Parliament
MSCCGMF	Maharashtra State Co-operative Cotton Growers Marketing Federation
MSEB	Maharashtra State Electricity Board
MSP	Minimum Support Price
NCP	Nationalist Congress Party
NCRB	National Crime Record Bureau
NGO	Non-Governmental Organization
NSM	New Social Movement
NT	Nomadic Tribes
OBC	Other Backward Classes
PDS	Public Distribution System
RSS	Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangha
SC	Scheduled Castes
Sena	Shiv Sena
SEZ	Special Economic Zones
SSS	Svabhimani Shetkari Sanghatana
ST	Scheduled Tribes
VJAS	Vidarbha Jan Andolan Samiti
WTO	World Trade Organization

I. Introduction

Every half hour a farmer commits suicide in India[1] – arguably because of an 'agrarian crisis' induced by neoliberal policies in Indian agriculture. News reports suggest that since 1995 more than 300,000 farmers have committed suicide in the country. The government data has been critiqued as it often under-reports these numbers. P. Sainath, a noted journalist who has covered the issue for a long time, recently pointed out that the number of farmer suicides might be even higher[2]. Even these conservative estimates have sent alarm signals to the media, politicians and academia in India and abroad.

On a personal note, my interest in the subject of 'agrarian crisis' in India arose because of the sad reality of the countryside reflected in these numbers. But when I began researching the 'agrarian crisis' in India, I became increasingly uncomfortable with referring to farmers as 'suffering subjects' driven to suicide by the government and market forces. I realized that I was only looking at the suffering through exploitation, violence or adverse social relations. Robbins (2013) inspired me to go beyond this singular bias. With the evolution of anthropology (and development studies) away from 'the savage' or 'the other', he argues that the savage has been replaced by the suffering lot. This category of suffering then serves as justification for research. Robbins called for an anthropology of 'the good', which takes a closer look at people trying to foster good, be it through their values, social relations or ideas for the future. To this effect, I became interested in the farmers' perceptions of their situations, particularly in their hopes for the future, and in their protests as a form of agency.

In this study, I aim to analyse the protests by farmers[3] groups in Vidarbha, a region in Central India that has come to be identified as a region with farmers' suicides. My aim is to understand how activists and supporters of these groups mobilise other peasants around the 'agrarian crisis' in Vidarbha, how they organize activities, articulate their demands and what solutions they envision for overcoming the crisis. I also try to illustrate the difficulties and ambiguities that are inherent in these processes.

The visions and ideas of 'movement' actors are of particular importance in the wider context of a controversial debate among academics as well as activists about the future of agriculture. Globally, agriculture is changing in a fundamental way and discussions about its future are influenced by transnational agrarian movements and their ideas – most prominently the idea of food sovereignty – at all levels. At the same time, the idea that small and medium farmers farming with ecological methods can feed the world has reignited old questions. Furthermore, profitable agriculture has become almost impossible for small or medium farmers in regions like Vidarbha in Central India. Therefore, this study makes a strong case for listening to grassroots voices about the

[1] This number is based on Mishra (2014) for the period 1995 – 2012. See part VII for details.

[2] See a recent BBC report: http://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-india-28205741; Sainath 2015.

[3] For a clarification of the term farmer that I use throughout this work, see section 2.1, chapter II.

future of agriculture and then goes on to critically analyse them in the light of the neoliberal policy regime that has restructured an already unequal agrarian structure in rural India.

1 Debates about Agrarian Change and Social Movements

This research is positioned within two broader debates: first, the question of agrarian change or the prospects of farmers under neoliberal policy regimes (globally and particularly in India), and second, the debate surrounding the emergence of social movements and their possible outcomes. In this section, I will broadly outline these debates to then refine my research question.

1.1 Changing Agriculture

Farmers' Prospects

In his book "The Age of Extremes", Eric Hobsbawm anticipated what was supposedly the most significant development of the second half of the twentieth century, which was the death of the peasantry (Hobsbawm 1994). According to him, the class of peasantry that was once the most dominant mode of living had become marginalised and almost disappeared. However, contrary to expectations, we have been witness to the extraordinary persistence of the peasant class in India and other southern countries (Bernstein 2001) – though the respective processes are very different among regions, e.g. among Indian states (Mohanty and Lenka 2016, 188). Many authors expect the peasantry to persist in the decades to come because large-scale capitalist agriculture does not seem to consolidate and surplus labour is not absorbed into the industrial and service sectors (see e.g. Basu 2013).

In the past decades of rural neoliberal restructuring, the world of farmers has been changing tremendously. Despite being internally highly differentiated, people all over the world working in agriculture under neoliberal transformation share a wide range of experiences: from a consolidation and rise of existing economic and social inequalities along with the concentration of control over the means of production, as well as a general de-prioritization of rural populations (Patel 2006). Patel's list of problems is "gloomy, but helpfully so" (ibid, 78) as it brings back our focus on certain key issues in the debate about farmers' prospects in the neoliberal age (see also Amin 2004; McMichael 2006).

There are different lenses for studying these developments. The corresponding debates link to the grand theories about the path of development of agrarian societies. They encompass the big questions that early scholars of economy and society have concerned themselves with in the last 150 years. To put this research in context, I will give a brief overview of such debates (see chapter VI).

Proponents of a neoliberal development, or of the mainstream/residual perspective, as Geiser (2014) called it, believe that liberalizing trade and financial markets with freely floating prices of agricultural commodities and allowing an increasing importance of

corporations in agriculture would eventually lift farmers from poverty (see e.g. Braun et al. 2005). At the same time, there is a growing realisation that "*certain basic conditions of life must be provided to people everywhere*" (Sanyal 2007 cited in Chatterjee 2008a, 55) if the market does not provide these conditions for whatever reasons. The argument goes that alternatively the state or Non-Governmental Organisations (NGOs) should intervene to ensure food and social security or agricultural improvements (Harriss-White 2008). All these ideas are comfortable with the idea of a benign neoliberal capitalist development.

Leftist scholars, or the proponents of the radical/relational perspective (Geiser 2014), criticise the basic tenets of the neoliberal capitalist development path. Many of these scholars are engaged in debates around the 'contemporary agrarian question'. T J Byres took an orthodox Marxist stand, arguing that agriculture should industrialise and the agricultural labourers should find work in another sectors (Byres 1991, cited in Lerche 2013, 384). Therefore, Byres was optimistic about development in the form of a high-growth capitalist economy that could provide better conditions for the rural labour force in a non-agrarian economy, this capitalist economy eventually being a precursor to socialism. Consequently, he holds a critical position towards the idea of redistributive land reform because it could lead to "*farming miniature plots within a stagnant, backward, agrarian economy*" (Lerche 2013, 384).

According to Lerche (2013), this approach was challenged on various grounds. One group of challenges comes from within the political economy tradition and comprises three different arguments. First, Byres has focused on the transformation from pre-capitalist to capitalist production relationships. However, Bernstein pointed out that capitalist agriculture has been prevalent all over the world since the end of colonialism. Therefore, pre-capitalist classes that could be a barrier to capitalist transformation have ceased to exist. The "*pre-capitalist peasant and landlord classes have, by now, been almost universally transformed into capitalist farmers, petty commodity producers and 'classes of labour', all existing within capitalist social relations"* (Bernstein 1996, 42-43).

Second, he argues against Byres' notion that agricultural production accumulates capital, which contributes to industrial development in the same country. Circuits of capital and commodities are no longer national, "*but are mediated by the effects of the circuits of international capital and world markets, for each sector in* any *capitalist economy"* (Bernstein 1996, 42-43; emphasis in original). As a consequence, the accumulation of capital within agriculture is no longer decisive for the national industrial capital in the same country. Based on these two arguments, Bernstein argued that the agrarian question of capital has been fundamentally altered in the current globalised era (see particularly Bernstein 2006).

The third argument concerns the agrarian question of labour. Traditionally, the struggle was against the feudal landlords and for land reforms, a struggle that potentially united the peasants and the capital for a peasant-based growth, and an accumulation from below. Today, the pre-capitalist peasants have already been transformed into a *"modern, fragmented, reserve army of labour"* (Lerche 2013, 386) and the agrarian question from

below, namely the quest for land reforms, has been replaced by "*general questions of the relationship between capital and labour*" (ibid), by demands for a *"generalized living wage"* (ibid).

Another group of challenges comes from the proponents of new concepts such as food sovereignty, arguably related to the post-developmentalist perspective (Geiser 2014). They claim to have developed an alternative to both the leftist and the neoliberal capitalist view of agriculture that focuses on capital accumulation in agriculture (McMichael 2007). They call this alternative the 'peasant way' of agriculture and bring forward two major points of criticism. First, they argue that the classical agrarian question fails to see that small-scale farmers too also subordinated to international capital in the era of neoliberal globalization. The global corporate food regime based on the liberalization of agricultural markets and withdrawal of the state from rural areas purportedly creates transnational agribusiness near-monopolies. This food regime ruins and dispossesses the peasantry and is responsible for rural poverty and hunger. The second point of criticism is that the agrarian question doesn't problematize the ecological consequences of high growth capitalism. There is an urgent need to find alternatives to an economic growth based solely on fossil fuels. Therefore, the 'food sovereignty' argument envisions a food regime that includes aspects of social justice and environmental sustainability (Fairbairn 2008; McMichael 2007, 2012).

Many of these ideas relating to food sovereignty are heavily contested, particularly with respect to the category of the 'peasantry'. A majority of scholars agree that the realities of the people living from agriculture are very different – according to their access to land, manpower or capital, their main crops, as well as their geographical region. A core contestation results from competing notions of a 'heterogeneous peasantry' versus a 'united peasantry' in the context of the neoliberal onslaught. As Bernstein (2013) argues, the focus on the unity of the peasants bears the danger of obscuring tensions within rural society – between different classes, generations or genders.

India: Debates on 'Agrarian Crisis'

In India, where more than half the working population depends on agriculture and the number of small and marginal farmers has been growing (Lerche 2013), the changes in agriculture – arguably due to neoliberal policies – are often labelled as an 'agrarian crisis'. The debates outlined above are mirrored in the Indian context. Some authors argue that the steeply falling agricultural profitability has hit all agrarian classes in India. A corollary of this argument is that the historical rise in the share of capitalist farming has been halted by neoliberal policies. The big landholders could maintain or increase their wealth by resorting to rent extraction and moneylending. However, the sections of the peasantry who had no alternative outside agriculture were being pauperized. At the same time, the corporatization of agriculture has allowed transnational capital to take control over peasant production (see e.g. Patnaik 2010, cited in Lerche 2013, 390; Lerche 2015; Reddy 2016). This argument largely corresponds to the populist argument based on ideas of the 'urban bias' (see chapter II).

In contrast, other authors claim that rural groups, regions and crops were very differently affected by recent changes in the agricultural policies. They argue that the rural elite of big landholders and capitalist farmers continue to have high returns on their investment in agriculture. It was mostly the small and marginal farmers who suffered from the old agrarian inequalities as well as the New Economic Policies (see e.g. Ramachandran 2011; Reddy 2016).

It is characteristic for the debate on 'agrarian crisis' in India that the farmers' suicides are often highlighted as the worst manifestation of the 'agrarian crisis' (see e.g. Reddy and Mishra 2010b; Vikram 2016). Virtually all the articles about the crisis of agriculture bring up the phenomenon of the farmer suicides. Many authors use it rather directly as an indicator for the problems of the rural economy and society – as well as for the severity of these problems (Mohanty 2005). The suicide statistics are then cited as evidence of the harm that neoliberal policies have caused (Mohanty 2005; Vasavi 2009, 2012).

This debate has constructed quite a linear – and rather unanimously acknowledged – causality between the neoliberal policies of the government and the farmers' suicides. This link in turn provoked the question whether farmers' suicides are passive acts or can be seen as "*the last act of the desperate to speak in a political voice*" (Vasavi 2009, 104, see also Münster 2012, 2015a; see chapter VII).

Active Farmers

These reflections bring me to the question of what farmers do themselves when faced with the economic changes they have to face. Among the possible ways of engaging, the focus here lies on political mobilization and collective action: do farmers mobilize around their issues, formulate demands and engage in the above-mentioned debates, and if so, how? In India, in particular, there is a diverse history of farmer movements that have contributed to debates about the political economy of development, 'agrarian crisis' and farmer suicides in India (Arora 2001; Brass 1995; Dhanagare 1995; Lindberg 2010; Omvedt 2005; see section 2, chapter IV).

At the global level, transnational agrarian movements like *La Vía Campesina* claim to speak for the small farmers of the world. They have grown in the last decades and revived the debate about the future of peasant production (Desmarais 2002). *La Vía Campesina* in particular has been important in developing the concept of food sovereignty and brought it to fame among farmer activists worldwide. The transnational agrarian movement is therefore credited for having reframed the discourse on development of agriculture (Lerche 2013; Reddy and Mishra 2010b).

While transnational agrarian movements have grown on a global level, in India the big farmer movements have instead lost their strength, i.e. the peasant movements of 1950s and 1960s that mostly aimed at land reforms, and the New Farmers' Movements of 1970s and 1980s whose major demand was a remunerative price for agricultural produce (Arora 2001). Despite this broad tendency, there still are activists and groups which mobilize around the contemporary 'agrarian crisis'. Such movements have the

potential to influence what visions of a future agriculture are conceived, discussed and eventually put into practice (Borras, Edelmann, and Kay 2008; McMichael 2007). This brings me to the second broad debate to which this research relates.

1.2 Social Movements

Theories of social movements are concerned with the how and why of collective action in a society and its resulting consequences. It is a broad field of theories, some being concerned with the structures that enable or prevent social mobilisation, some with the psychological factors that cause certain individuals to become active, and still others about the role of ideas. In the following sections, I briefly touch upon these approaches and arrange them according to the questions guiding this study: why do social movements emerge, how do people mobilize others and how does framing challenge ideas?

Why Social Movements Emerge

The question of why and under which conditions social movements emerge might be the most fundamental question in social movement studies. I focus here first on the ideas that place the conditions, experiences and grievances of people at the centre stage – broadly called the strain and breakdown theories.

These theories have a long history going back to Marx's idea that contestation is inherent in capitalist societies (Tarrow 2011). In the 1950s, these theories had a comeback as collective behaviour theories. They relied on Durkheim's ([1893] 1964, cited in Buechler 2011) argument that the lesser degree of social integration in modern societies could lead to chronic strains or acute breakdown of people, thereby causing different dysfunctional behaviours such as collective behaviour or suicide. Collective behaviour was therefore seen as an exception to normal political activities, most often with negative connotations (Tarrow 2011).

The collective behaviour theories have been criticised at many levels, mostly as being too deterministic in assuming a linear relationship between the macro-level strain and the micro-level behaviour. A certain level of discontent and suffering is found among large segments of the population, but collective action does not emerge everywhere. Therefore, strain and discontent are at most necessary but not sufficient causes of social movements. These shortcomings and the emergence of the resource mobilization theory (see section 1.2 below) led to the disappearance of the collective behaviour theories. Only recently have theoretical approaches that put the grievance of people back at the centre witnessed a revival (Buechler 2011 and 2016, 104).

Current proponents of this idea have a positive disposition towards social movements, but share the argument that a social movement can emerge with a common grievance at the centre as a crucial mobilising factor. The grievance as a mobilising factor may even compensate for a lack of resources and organizational properties (Buechler 2011). To counter the argument that grievance is only a necessary and not a sufficient condition for the emergence of social movement and hence of little explanatory power, they argue

that it is important to closely study which type of grievances makes the emergence of social movements more likely.

There are three main arguments under the contemporary version. First, it is the relative deprivation compared to other groups or a rapidly increasing deprivation over time that heightens the sense of grievance and forms a reason to initiate protest, particularly if the processes in place to distribute resources are perceived to be unjust (see e.g. Buechler 2011). Second, more than the absolute sense of grievance, it is a rising sense of injustice that can explain the emergence of social movements. This process of rising consciousness can be a result of education or of the appearance of NGOs or existing protest groups (Bebbington 2009). Third, a quotidian disruption in peoples' everyday life can cause unrest and protest. This idea is based on Habermas' concept of the "*progressive colonization of lifeworld*" describing the process of external institutions exercising an increasing control over people's daily life (Habermas 1987, in Bebbington 2009; Snow et al. 1998).

Bebbington (2009) elaborated on the colonization of lifeworlds in today's world: new forms of investment in (rural) areas, cultural modernization affecting 'traditional' practices, new practices of dispossession (Harvey 2005), and the liberalisation of the markets or upsetting of prices (Edelman 2005). With regard to agriculture, these changes directly relate to the issues discussed earlier about farmers' prospects. Sahoo (2010) also argued that globalisation in India has led to the withdrawal of the state from many of its earlier social functions, which, in turn, has given rise to more visible forms of inequality and exploitation. Globalisation and its policy processes have, in other words, created conditions where mobilisation of those adversely affected becomes likely as a response (referring back to Karl Polanyi's 'double movement'). This suggests that the contemporary developments in agriculture have the potential to cause widespread farmer protests. I will take up this proposition by studying farmers' perceptions of their situation under neoliberal policies.

How to Mobilize People

Approaches focussing on grievance, however, tend to underestimate the importance of mobilization strategies and resources. As mentioned above, the strain and breakdown approaches often have a rather deterministic or mechanistic approach and assume that certain kind of grievances almost automatically lead to collective action. While these structural mobilization potentials surely are important conditions for collective action, the mobilizing structures, the resources – and the leaders and activists – of an emerging movement are crucial as well.

Based on this criticism, a second theoretical approach emerged: the resource mobilization theory. It aimed to fill this gap and grasp the importance of available money, time, networks and leadership. With the resource mobilization theory, a rational type of agency became more important and the mobilizing structures that enable collective action came into focus (Kriesi 2014). The resource mobilization theorists still assume a mechanistic relationship between macro-level strain and micro-level

behaviour. Logically, they argue that the most important factors for a social movement to emerge are the availability of sufficient resources (see McAdam, McCarthy, and Zald 1996; McCarthy and Zald 2001). From such a perspective, social movements were seen as institutionalized elements of the society that fight for their particular group's interests.

The resource mobilisation theory further developed into the theory of political opportunities (Kriesi 2004; McAdam, Tarrow, and Tilly 2003), namely the political opportunities for mobilization. The political opportunity structure includes formal political institutions as well as discursive opportunities, the latter referring to which ideas become visible and resonate with the public. The political opportunity structures can change according to the perceived shifts in power disparities between the elite and the challengers. Such shifts can improve the chances of success as well as raise the costs of repression. The success of collective action then depends on seizing those political opportunities (Kriesi 2014).

The resource mobilization theory particularly mentions leadership as an important resource – e.g. to cease such political opportunities. But, as Morris and Staggenborg (2011) argued, the resource mobilization theorists most often talk about the great leaders and neglect the "*myriad levels of leadership and roles*" (ibid 171). The painstaking work of mobilization especially needs more attention. For the context of South Asia in particular, there are important debates over leaders in social movements and their ability to mobilize supporters (see chapter V).

How Framing Challenges Ideas

Questions about why and how social movements emerge lead to the question of why movements matter. Social movements can have very different expected outcomes. Beyond the relatively more visible results such as influencing policy changes, there are outcomes that are more difficult to capture or foresee (Bebbington 2009; Giugni 1998). For instance, the outcome of a social movement can be to challenge the hegemonic opinion and to politicise poverty or inequality (Bebbington 2007). Social movements are then seen as a phenomena giving rise to meanings and values that otherwise remain unheard (Bebbington 2009). In the particular case of movements that emerge around issues of poverty, Bebbington (2010) argued that they can potentially challenge the "*ways in which poverty is understood, governed and acted on in society (…) and how government intervenes in the pursuit of poverty reduction (as defined by government)"* (ibid, 1305).

Snow and Benford (relating to Goffman 1974) introduced the concept of 'framing' in social movement studies (Benford and Snow 2000; Snow 2011). Framing refers to the effort of social movement participants to use language and ideas in order to influence the public's understanding of certain issues and to persuade people. Framing is thus like a marketing of ideas (Oliver and Johnston 2000). It is important for the emergence and success of a movement whether or not its ideas resonate with the public and can spark solidarity. This in turn depends on how those ideas are framed. By emphasizing the

seriousness of their claims, blaming somebody for the problems and suggesting solutions, movement activists mobilize possible supporters and try to effect change (Benford and Snow 2000; Johnston 2010; Snow 2011).

McMichael (2010) pointed to the same direction, emphasizing that social movements all over the world challenge the predominant path of neoliberal development and contemporary accumulation through dispossession. By bringing to light seemingly "*unthinkable alternatives*", they challenge the *"epistemic assumptions [namely the market episteme] that order the contemporary world*" (McMichael 2010, 11). In the context of a neoliberal restructuring of agriculture and the difficulty of imagining alternatives to such a development, farmers' movements in particular acquire an important role in bringing forward their issues and articulating their ideas (see chapter VI).

Despite the relevance of framing and ideational contestation, it is important to refer back to the more structural approaches inherent in those ideas that place grievance centre stage. In order to understand the material constraints and social processes of the building of frames, it is necessary to reflect on the origins of ideas and the relation between ideas and 'reality' or material interests (Oliver and Johnston 2000; Rudé 1980). Even Snow (2011) stated that frame theorists focused little on the material bases of the frames.

I would argue that it is indeed important to reflect on the material conditions and grievances that contribute to the ideas and frames of movement actors; however, these structural conditions do not turn into ideas mechanistically. Rather they are highly subjective and depend on people's perceptions. Therefore, this research is conceptually positioned at the intersection of the perceived material conditions of people and the frames and strategies they use in their movement activities.

2 Research Questions and Objective

Existing research into the phenomenon of peasant suicides tends to focus on the suffering subjects. This study focuses on the agency of those who survive the increasingly difficult agrarian scene of the global South, on how they articulate their issues and how they organize. It also concentrates on these peasants' understanding of their situation and questions the popular conception of the 'agrarian crisis' that neglects the social and economic factors which mediate the crisis' effects on that larger category identified as the peasantry. Please refer to the respective chapters to see in greater detail how the research is embedded in current debates.

Against the backdrop of agrarian change in India and the agency of farmers to engage with those changes, I introduce the research objective of this thesis as follows: *To show how people in Vidarbha affected by the 'agrarian crisis' mobilise to struggle for their concerns/interests and what the latter are.*

This leads to the following research question: *How do the actors involved in the mobilisations around the 'agrarian crisis' in Vidarbha understand their situation, how do they envision a future for agriculture, and what is the nature of these mobilisations[4]?*

In order to operationalize this main research question, I tackle the following sub-questions:

1. Mobilisation: What is the nature of the mobilisations that form around the 'agrarian crisis' and the phenomenon of farmer suicides in Western Vidarbha?
    a. Organization (see chapter IV)
        i. Which actors and groups are involved?
        ii. How are the groups organized and how do the actors cooperate?
        iii. What are the main activities and demands of the different groups and actors?
        iv. Do we find a heterogeneity of groups, or can we talk of a 'movement'?
    b. Participation and mobilization (see chapter V)
        i. Who does the work of mobilization?
        ii. What mobilization strategies do they use?
        iii. What motivations do the actors have to participate?
        iv. How much do actors participate in electoral politics or cooperate with political parties and how do they justify their choice?
2. Discursive background of the mobilisations: What is the actors' understanding of the present agrarian situation and how do they frame its further development?
    a. How do the actors understand the present situation of agriculture in Vidarbha? How do these perceptions about the situation of agriculture correlate with available data? (see chapter III)
    b. What frames do the involved actors use to construct long–term visions for agriculture? How do these ideas differ between actors? (see chapter VI)
    c. Framing farmer suicides (see chapter VII)
        i. How do the actors frame farmer suicides and where do they locate the reasons?
        ii. How and why do these frames become part of the movements' strategies?

By examining and discussing these sub-questions, I want to contribute to the above-sketched debates around social movements and agrarian change. The ethnographic approach (see below, section 1.3) at the intersection of social movement studies and questions of agrarian change provides insights into mobilisation processes as well as the conception of social movements in rural areas. This study can contribute to the understanding of movements with low levels of activity in marginal regions of the

[4] I will come back to the conceptual issues of (social) movement in part IV. Until then, I put the word movement in quotation marks.

world. Resistance against neoliberalism, strategies of mobilization against and visions of what lies beyond are studied from a grassroots perspective, which can help understand the realities of farmers facing these neoliberal policies as well as the impacts of such mobilisations. In this sense, I aim to contribute on a policy level. Rural poverty as well as the low profitability of small and medium scale agriculture – particularly in dry land areas – are severe problems in the context of an agricultural sector under intensifying neoliberalisation, in India and elsewhere. Therefore, studying the conditions on the ground and capturing the perspectives of those concerned is of the utmost importance. This study should help understand these processes better and provide a relevant background for policies in this context. Finally, with this research, I hope to carry the 'movement' groups' demands to a different audience. By critically analysing their claims and visions, I can at best provide new ideas or approaches for new analyses to the 'movement' actors.

3 Methodological Approach

I used a qualitative methodology to understand the internal dynamics of mobilisation and the perspectives of activists and supporters. To capture on-going activities that are often fluid and exist in shifting conditions, ethnography as a methodological approach has particular relevance (Plows 2008, 1524). Along with Plows, I argue that ethnography enables the researcher of social mobilisations to "*understand what is going on 'upstream'; at the grassroots, in often hidden, 'latent' (Melucci 1996), social conditions*" (ibid, 1524).

Apart from participant observation, I include qualitative interviews as another important method. The study focuses on a mobilisation that is fragmented both in geographical terms but also with regards to the involved actors. Consequently, I followed the involved actors to understand mobilisation (see below).

Epistemologically, ethnography can take two different stands. Sierk et al. (2009) argue that an ethnographer can either be a realist 'knower' who promises to mirror a social reality. Alternatively, an ethnographer can also take an interpretivist stand and understand the contingency of what is being reported. Social realities are then understood as socially constructed in an interplay between individual agency and social structure. In this sense, the ethnographic material is co-constructed by the research participants and the researchers. Fabian and de Rooij (2010) hold that *"epistemology can then be conceived as public reflection on how we think we can legitimize, put up for critique and discussion, what we offer as knowledge based on ethnography".*

As a middle ground between the realist versus interpretivist stand, Maxwell (2012) defended critical realism in social research (based on Roy Bhaskar, see Bhaskar and Hartwig 2010). He argues that critical realism is a "*commitment to the existence of a real, though not an 'objectively' knowable, world*" (Maxwell 2012, 10). Critical realism means to commit to an ontological realism in the sense that "*there is a real world that exists independently of our perceptions, theories, and constructions*", but at the same time it

holds up a form of epistemological constructivism, which means that "*our* understanding *of this world is inevitably a construction from our own perspectives and standpoint*" (both quotations: ibid, 5; emphasis in original).

There are two implications of such a stand for this research. First, as the epistemological approach is constructivist, I understand that it is not possible to have "*any 'objective' or certain knowledge of the world, and [I] accept the possibility of alternative valid accounts of any phenomenon*" (Maxwell 2012, 5). Consequently, there is no possibility of finding a single, 'correct' understanding of the world independent from one's standpoint. But still, Maxwell argues, "*realists (…) see theoretical terms as referring to ((…) not 'reflecting') actual features and properties of a real world"* (ibid, 8).

This leads me to the second implication, namely that a real world exists beyond the multiple realities as incommensurable, socially constructed worlds. It is important for this research that "*mental states and attributes (including meanings and intentions), although not directly observable, are part of the real world*" (Maxwell 2012, 8). I consider it crucial to believe in the existence of a real world, because the interviewed farmers arguably perceive their conditions and constraints as real and not just socially constructed. Here, I follow Putnam (1999) who argued that this belief in a real world does justice to most peoples' – and my interviewees' – notion. This "*notion that our worlds and life are constrained by a reality not of our own invention plays a deep role in our lives and is to be respected*" (Putnam 1999, 9).

This combination of a realist stand and ethnography defines this research. While it is mainly based on perceptions of people, it often is contextualized with other data, e.g. statistics – particularly in chapter II and III about the agricultural situation in Vidarbha, but also in chapter VII about farmer suicides. This use of different data does not imply a hierarchy of importance, but serves as a triangulation strategy.

Typically, ethnographic research is inductive and strongly relies on material from fieldwork (see e.g. Caines 2010). Caines cited Charles Frake *"that the ethnographer seeks to find not only answers to the questions he or she brings into the field, but also questions to explain what is being observed"* (ibid, 432). In this sense, I conducted inductive research strongly basing my research questions and research procedure on empirical data from the field. Therefore, the research process was designed in an iterative way, which means that the steps of literature review, data production and data analysis were conducted alternately. The research process is shown in the table below. In the following, I will describe these steps in further detail, starting with the definition of the empirical field in which this study is embedded.

Table 1: Overview of the research process

	Time	Activities
Phase 1	07/2010 - 01/2011	Initial literature review Definition of research interest
1st field visit	01/2011 – 03/2011	Explorative field work: initial interviews Choosing the region Vidarbha Assistant: Aditee Hedaoo
Phase 2	03/2011 – 10/2011	Writing proposal Defining research questions Preparing main field visit
2nd field visit	10/2011 – 04/2012	Main field visit Choosing the 'movement' groups Shadowing/interviewing 'movement' activists Observing/interviewing 'movement' activists and supporters in villages Assistant: Premsagar Tasgaonkar
Phase 3	04/2012 – 04/2013	Analysis of empirical data Literature review Redefining research questions Initial writing
3rd field visit	05/2013 – 07/2013	Collection of missing and continuative data Assistant: Manoj Patil
Phase 4	07/2013 – 12/2014	Analysis of empirical data Writing of all chapters
4th field visit	01/2015 – 03/2015	Discussion of findings with research participants Presentation of findings at research institutions Assistant: Aniket Gattuwar
Phase 5	03/2015 – 08/2016	Finalising chapters

3.1 Research Focus

During an initial explorative field visit, I interviewed many activists throughout Maharashtra who claimed to speak in the name of farmers. I started with names that I received from an academic expert, Prof. R. Ramakumar, through Internet research, as well as snowball sampling. The method of snowball sampling provided me with many names and opened many doors. But it bore the risk that I would only get names from within a certain network of activists while leaving out others. Therefore, I used other sources such as newspapers to find additional names, where I could start snowball sampling anew. Finally I came back to the same names through these three methods and therefore considered my sample of activists and groups as sufficiently complete.

Starting in Mumbai and Western Maharashtra, the interviews took me to Marathwada and Vidarbha, and it is in Western Vidarbha where I found a number of activists who claim to speak in the name of the farmers[5]. The notions of 'agrarian crisis' and farmer suicides were most prominent when talking about Vidarbha's agriculture, be it in interviews with activists or journalists as well as in scientific papers. The interviewed activists told me stories of indebted farmers, suicides, low prices and a failing government. I found a dynamic and diverse 'movement' around these issues and decided to focus on these groups and activists[6]. Beside this 'movement', Western Vidarbha is interesting in terms of its agriculture, particularly with regards to rain-fed agriculture in the context of liberalizing agricultural markets (see chapter VI). The region is part of the so-called cotton belt of India, dominated by mostly rain-fed agriculture, and many authors argue that the region is heavily affected by an 'agrarian crisis' (see chapter III).

This geographical focus on districts of Western Vidarbha is due in part to the groups' strong regional focus. The groups are active in particular villages, most of them in Western Vidarbha. Vidarbha is also famous for its districts that have a reputation, that is statistically backed-up, of being a 'hotspot' for farmer suicides (see chapter VII). This also made these districts an interesting study site. However, several groups do, of course, have activities, networks and most of all discourses that go far beyond Western Vidarbha.

In the following, I will specify the sampling strategy that I used for the second and third field visits. I start with the groups and activists before I come to the villages and the groups' supporters in the villages. To choose the groups, the villages as well as the research participants, I applied purposeful sampling, i.e., I chose the most typical cases (see Patton 2002). But of course – particularly when choosing villages – I also had to apply convenience sampling. The aim with these sampling strategies was to select 'movement' groups and research participants that promised a high amount of new information.

Selecting Groups

First, I attempted to map the groups and activists that claim to mobilize for farmer issues. To select a sample for further study, several criteria were important. First and foremost, the groups should be active, organize activities on different levels and have a presence (i.e. activists working) in at least one village in the Western Vidarbhan districts. These points were easy to find out through interviews with journalists and activists and left me with only a few groups and activists. Second, the group should have

[5] Because of this sampling strategy, organisations for agricultural labour did not come into my focus. I have found agricultural labour organizations, but very few (one example is the All India Agricultural Workers Union). They do not talk about the 'agrarian crisis' and have a very different focus in their work.

[6] Another aspect is that the Naxalite movement is not very present in Western Vidarbha. Of course, the Naxalite movement can also be understood as a farmer movement. But studying the Naxalite movement would lead to a different, particular field that is not the aim of this research.

some sort of a base, a group of supporters and activists. There were some political leaders who were also considered farmer leaders by the interviewees, but there was no group forming around them. Therefore I excluded them in a first step. Some of these so-called farmer leaders that I excluded here became part of my research as individual activists. Third, the group should have certain political demands that go beyond (self-) help or charitable activities.

I found that many of these non-governmental organisations (NGOs) or self-help groups, though concerned with certain aspects of farmer life, did not make explicitly political demands from the state. Many of these groups shared this characterisation in so far as they distinguished themselves from 'movements'.

The fourth criterion, that the group should not be a political party, proved very difficult to realize in the field. While some groups were not at all engaged in electoral politics, others did engage but still claimed to be part of a 'movement' and not a party. In the end, this criterion blurred and eventually I did study some of the groups that engage in electoral politics after all; one is even a political party. I have reflected on this very interesting issue when describing the heterogeneous 'movement' (chapter IV as well as this analysis of the balancing act by leaders between electoral politics and 'movement' activities (chapter V).

Based on this list of criteria, I identified five groups to study in more detail

- Svabhimani Shetkari Sanghatana (SSS),
- Kisan Adikar Abiyan (KAA),
- Vidarbha Jan Andolan Samiti (VJAS),
- Bharatiya Kisan Sangha (BKS)
- All India Kisan Sabha (AIKS)

Apart from these groups, several individual activists, including journalists, academics, (former) politicians or farmer leaders, became important for the research as well (see chapter IV).

Choosing Villages[7]

For each of these five groups, I studied one village in greater detail to specifically understand the processes of mobilisation on the ground. I split up the fieldwork during the main field visit (see table 1). I visited three villages along with my research assistant Premsagar Tasgaonkar during the second field visit. Following the survey of these three villages, Tasgaonkar went alone to the fourth village, by which time he was familiar with the research process. In the fifth village, Andrea Wynistorf, a Masters student at the University of Zurich conducted her MSc-thesis (Wynistorf 2012). Consequently, I rely on her findings when I describe this group. Additionally, I accessed Wynistorf's interview

[7] I consider the village as a sociological unit. The important point was not whether or not that physical space actually qualified as a 'revenue village' or a *gram panchayat*, but that people said that they belonged to that particular village.

transcripts, which proved helpful in particular because she asked some extra questions in her interviews that relate to my research questions.

Table 2: Overview over the 'movement' groups and the respective villages in the research process.

Group	Village	Time	Covered by
Svabimani Shetkari S.	Village SSS	3 weeks	Lieberherr
Vidarbha Jan Andolan S.	Village VJAS	3 weeks	Lieberherr
Kisan Adikar Abiyan	Village KAA	3 weeks	Lieberherr
Bharatiya Kisan Sangh	Village BKS	1 week	Tasgaonkar
All India Kisan Sabha	Villages AIKS	3 weeks	Wynistorf

I was interested in studying mobilization in villages where the groups in focus are active. Therefore, I asked the leaders or main activists of the groups to give me names of villages where this was the case. Typically, there had not been many villages where leaders claimed to have a strong presence. Among those, I first focussed on those that grow cotton under rain-fed conditions, because these conditions are often associated with farmer suicides. Second, I chose those villages where the local activists were interested in cooperating with me. Because I wanted to understand the activists' work in the villages, live as their guest, and follow them to agitations and activities from time to time, this second criterion became the dominant one.

The groups were active only in certain districts or villages, and their level of activity differed strongly among villages. Therefore, in the villages I chose – where one group was active – none of the other groups were active or notably present. As a result of this reality as well as my sampling strategy, the villages strongly corresponded to the groups: one group was active in one village. Therefore (and as part of the anonymization strategy, see below), I name the villages according to the group I studied there. As an example, the village, where I studied the group KAA is therefore called village KAA.

Choosing Research Participants

Within the groups that I studied in more detail, I talked to many different people, ranging from the main leaders, activists on different levels and casual supporters. Because of the approach to 'follow the group', the sampling approach was top-down. This was also the case in the villages, where I first talked to the local activist. To get a more detailed view on the role and position of the local activists, I interviewed not only the activist of the selected village, but also activists from three to five other (often neighbouring) villages. Then, I asked the main activist to provide me the names of supporters, whom I interviewed next. I aimed to cover all active supporters as well as some occasional supporters and sympathisers.

Additionally, I included some socio-economic indicators. First and from a rural development perspective, I was interested in learning about the perspective of farmers with different sizes of landholdings, particularly that of small and marginal farmers.

While it was possible to talk to farmers with different amounts of landholding and also to some who owned land and worked as labourers too (see below), talking to landless labourers or migrant labourers was rather difficult. This might have been because of the nature of my entry into the village: my hosts (the respective activists) often tried to steer the process of whom I was talking to and the labourers themselves did not seem to see any benefit in talking to me. Notably, the farmers supervising the labourers' work (as also observing mine) also made it difficult to talk to the latter. Consequently, it is important to state that my information about villages mostly reflects the farmers' views. The labourers to whom I could speak consistently maintained that those groups were for the farmers and that nobody was fighting for the labourers. Also the groups saw themselves as farmer 'movements' and most did not claim to speak for labourers (see chapter IV).

Second, I tried to interview women as well as men, but this also proved difficult. I was able to talk to women, but getting them to talk about agricultural politics proved difficult in most cases. Often, women straightforwardly said that agricultural politics was a man's issue and that they didn't know about it or weren't interested. In the groups under focus, women activists and supporters were a tiny minority and even those engaged were reluctant to talk about political issues. For that matter, the topic of women's rights or the position of women in society was hardly ever addressed by interviewees. If at all, it was about the increasingly high dowry and the burden for families that comes with having daughters. I am aware that women play a crucial role in agriculture as well as in many local political institutions and that there are many groups for whom women's issues are important (see e.g. Shah 2004b); however, in the particular groups I studied, issues of women's rights were practically a non-issue.

Third, I wanted to interview people from different castes and religions. This proved difficult as well for two possible reasons. First, interviewees emphasized that caste was no longer an issue and they were reluctant to tell me who belongs to which caste. The discourses of the various involved groups have always tended to bypass issues of differentiation within peasantry, particularly caste (see chapters IV and VI). I also had the impression that many interviewees knew well how I would think about caste, why I would ask these questions and so, they would tell me what (they thought) I wanted to hear. The second reason was that I generally interviewed people from only a few castes, because farmers who own land in one village often belong to similar castes (see chapter III).

To conclude, I want to emphasize again that I have chosen an approach that centres on groups that make up a form of heterogeneous 'movement' in my study region. This sampling approach had immediate consequences, particularly in the villages. Originally, I wanted to talk also to people who do not support a group or even criticize it. This, however, turned out to be impossible. I entered the village as a guest of the village activist (all male) and was therefore considered to be on his side. Regardless of my claims to be independent of the group, it seemed that many would not take the risk of criticising the groups or activists openly – with a few exceptions. As a consequence, I

write from a 'movement' perspective, though of course critically reflecting on the perceptions of the interviewees.

Overview over the Interviewees

Figure 1 provides some numbers regarding the interviews and provides a broad overview referring to the characteristics described above. In total this study relies on 254 interviews (including the material collected by Wynistorf and Tasgaonkar). A dozen of these were interviews with experts not directly belonging to any group and more than sixty I would instead classify as key actors or activists in the villages or beyond. Women represented roughly 10% of the research participants, but only 5% of the activists.

About 170 interviews were conducted in villages. Out of these research participants, roughly 80% provided information about their land holdings. Those 80% are constituted as follows (all numbers approximate)[8]: 10% had less than 2.5 acres or no land at all, 35% owned between 2.5 and 5 acres, 25% between 5 and 10 acres, again 25% between 10 and 25 acres, and only 5% more than 25 acres. These numbers are displayed in figure 1 below.

Regarding castes, more than 30% of the research participants did not want to specify their caste or religion. Some villages had a high population of one particular caste that was mirrored in the sample of research participants. Village VJAS has a high number of *Banjara* (belonging to Nomadic Tribes (NT) / Denotified Tribes (DNT))[9] and village SSS a high number of *Gavali* (also NT/DNT). The *Maratha-Kunbis* are many, particularly in village BKS and villages AIKS but are also present in other villages, while *Teli* are prominent in villages AIKS and village KAA. *Gond* (Scheduled Tribes (ST))[10], *Mali* (OBC)[11] and *Mang* (Scheduled Castes (SC))[12] as well as Buddhists[13] are present in all villages. Muslims were most numerous in village KAA and villages AIKS.

[8] For more details on the landholding classification see section 2.1, chapter II.

[9] These are official designations given to various groups of historically disadvantaged people in India. The terms are recognised in the Constitution of India and the various groups are designated in one or other of the categories. NT/DNT groups do not come under the Scheduled Tribes due to historical circumstances; they are listed separately. They are entitled to benefits from the Indian reservation system.

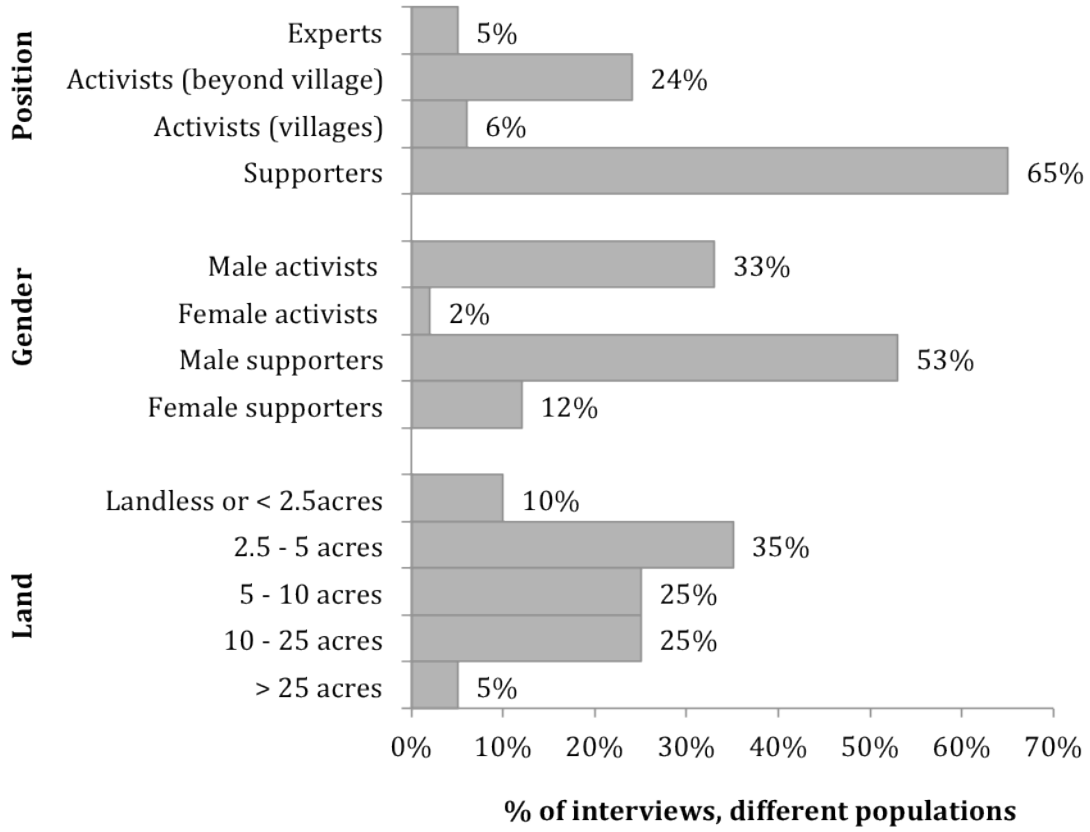
[10] Scheduled Tribes are another official designation. They are entitled to benefits from the Indian reservation system.

[11] OBC stands for Other Backward Classes. The government declares certain castes as part of OBCs, which allows them to benefit from the Indian reservation system.

[12] Scheduled Castes are another official designation. They are entitled to benefits from the Indian reservation system.

[13] In Vidarbha, many people that originally belonged to Scheduled Castes converted to Buddhism (following Ambedkar, who publicly converted to Buddhism in Nagpur in 1956).

Figure 1: Overview of the composition of interviewees (only illustrative)[14]



3.2 Data Collection and Production

I now show how my data was collected and constructed. I distinguish between these two processes. I use data collection for government reports or data provided by social activists themselves or journalists where neither my research assistants nor I were involved. By data construction I refer to data generated by research participants in cooperation with my research assistants and me, i.e. field notes and interview transcripts.

Review of Literature and Data Collection

First, I reviewed literature on academic debates about social mobilisation and movements in general, the conceptualization of movements, the processes of mobilization, the role of leaders and what movements can change. Second, I reviewed literature on farmer movements in India and globally, on agrarian change in general and on the 'agrarian crisis' in India in particular. For the last topic as well as the description of the study region, I relied strongly on government reports and fact-finding commissions. Additionally, some of the groups and activists produced information

[14] The percentages are based on different populations; for details please see text above. "Position" refers to the position of the interviewee in the 'movement' groups and has all interviewees as population; "Gender" also has all the interviewees as population; "Land" refers to a different population, namely those interviewees in the villages that revealed their landholdings.

material such as leaflets, books, flyers, and articles as well as promotional movies. I looked through the material during the field research together with my field assistants, but I did not analyse it systematically.

Data Construction

The public activities of the groups are often only a small part of their activities. Therefore, participant observation is a crucial method for capturing all forms of activities. For this research, participant observation was important at two levels: First to understand the groups and their activities (chapter IV), as well as mobilizing strategies, particularly that of leaders (chapter V); and second, to better comprehend the situation of farmers living in Vidarbha (chapter III). For the second point, I spent time in villages (see above), I have lived at the village activists' houses and taken part in everyday activities related to mobilisation and agriculture. For the former point, I asked the activists I interviewed in the first part of the field visit as well as the local activists whether they could take me with them whenever they were taking part in any mobilization activities. This approach is informed by Marcus (1998) who proposed to *"follow the people"* – which in my study entails following the 'movement' actors (cited in Rahm 2012, 126). I attended many meetings, rallies and other activities, observed the activities of the activists as well as the behaviour of the audience, and broadly captured the content of the meetings and speeches. Further I had many informal discussions during these agitations. Sometimes the activists allowed me to shadow them for a whole day. But most of the time, I just observed the meetings or rallies and then the activists went their own way.

The second main method was to conduct semi-structured interviews with the selected interview partners. For the interview guidelines I relied on Flick (2010). The questions varied depending on the interviewees, whether they were journalists or activists who served as key actors (see Fetterman 2008) and were well educated and familiar with political jargon, or farmers who simply participated in one agitation (see Annexes 1 and 2 for the interview guidelines). The interview guidelines were flexible and I combined and adapted them. For example, when I was interviewing the village activists, I combined elements of two interview guidelines. The guidelines included broad questions as well as stimulating questions and points to be touched upon. The interviews were the basis for chapters III to VII of this research. Particularly for the analysis of frames constructed by the groups' actors, Plows (2008, 1529) stated, interviews can serve to identify how the interviewees frame issues "*in their own terms*". Considering that social movement activists often start becoming active because they have been "*framed out*" or their demands ignored, this has particular importance (ibid, 1529). Consequently, interviews were especially important for chapters III and VI, where I analyse how the 'movement' actors frame their situation and possible visions for the future.

I took field notes during, before and after the interviews as well as during the participant observation in villages and at 'movement' activities. Sometimes I relied fully on my observations, but most often, I required the help of my field assistants to discuss

and try to make sense of what was happening. These field notes constituted an important part of the material for this research.

Co-construction of Data – A Drama[15] Staged for Me?

During fieldwork, there were many incidents that made the co-construction of data very visible. Sometimes, when I talked to supporters in villages or at agitations, I got the feeling that a drama was being staged for me. Because I came to study the 'movement' and I was introduced by leaders of the involved groups, it was probably crucial for lower level activists to create an impressive picture about their activities, achievements or reputation. Or perhaps it was simply their involvement that made them want to show me the best they had to offer. This desire, however, at times led to difficult situations.

Instead of following the activists like a shadow as I had intended, I was welcomed in villages with drums and trumpets, was asked to give speeches, forced to do interviews with farmers that were placed in front of me. During the long stays in all three villages (to different extents) it was difficult to interview the people I wanted to. I was often accompanied by some of the activist's family members or friends. When I finally managed to go around unaccompanied, the only people I ended up talking to again turned out to be relatives of the activist. Another time, some farmers – also friends of the village activists – heard that I was interested to talk to marginal farmers and suddenly people with considerable landholdings presented themselves as marginal farmers to me.

This reveals again that the chosen methodological approach provided me with the perspectives of 'movement' actors, but not of the people who were not part of the interviews. Considering my research questions that focus on the description of the 'movement', its mobilization strategies and framings, being able to understand many different perspectives within a 'movement' is a strength.

3.3 Data Management and Analysis

Translation and Transcription

The majority of the interviews happened in Marathi or Hindi and a minority in English. Only some activists were fluent in English. The research assistants Premsagar Tasgaonkar, Manoj Patil, Aditee Hedaoo and Aniket Gattuwar acted as interpreters in the field. Nearly all the interviews were recorded with a digital recorder. During meetings, rallies etc. they translated for me on the go. This information was not recorded, but I took notes later. Translation can both add and obscure information because translation always involves an interpretation, negotiation and construction of meaning. Nevertheless, I tried to minimize the potentially lost nomenclatures used by the research participants. Therefore, the research assistants did the transcription and translation of all the Marathi/Hindi interviews (I transcribed the English ones). They

[15] I use the word drama here not to emphasize a dramatic notion, but to refer to the Marathi word *tamasha* (a form of Marathi theatre), that was used by research participants often and that they translated into English as drama.

included information in the transcripts that had gone lost or been misinterpreted during the interviews.

Data Analysis

The data were analysed using techniques of Grounded Theory (Corbin and Strauss 2008; Strauss and Corbin 1996). This allowed me to engage with the material systematically and to become familiar with it. It also makes implicit assumptions visible. I used in particular open and axial coding intensively.

Grounded Theory is inductive. Induction refers to the fundamental distinction between quantitative and qualitative approaches where the former is exclusively concerned with 'hypothesis testing' and 'verification' and the latter focuses on developing concepts and grounded theory from the field experience. A qualitative researcher begins with the field, derives concepts, constructs a web of hypotheses and finally develops a grounded, field-based theory. This characteristic of qualitative methodology, hence, both in terms of methodological principle as well as valid epistemology, attempts to reduce the distance between field and theory. Since qualitative methodology is inductive in nature, it also proposes the 'emergent' nature of reality and permits the field reality to develop concepts and theories. We know that field data is initially fragmented and unstructured. The layers and structures within reality are infinite and evolving. Hence, there cannot be one foundational theory to explain the whole reality. Data emerging from the field thus lead to the generation of concepts and a web of hypotheses.

In applying Grounded Theory to develop this field-based theory, I started with open coding of the constructed data. This involves splitting up the material and becoming familiar with it. In this process, I used codes that I derived from the interviews. I had a large number of interviews and so I started by analysing about a dozen of them using open coding[16]. Then, I used axial, deductive coding[17] for those interviews before I continued with the others. During the whole process of coding, I kept switching between open and axial coding, between working inductively and using the codes derived from previous interviews. This change between inductive and deductive work proved very challenging. But it allowed me to better understand the situation and statements of the research participants. I used selective coding[18], the third coding method of Grounded Theory, mainly in the process of writing when I structured the material defining the thread of the story. During coding, I technically worked both with the computer program atlas.ti as well as manually with printouts of the texts and markers.

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[16] Open coding is to segment and divide the data into similar groupings. By going back and forth and constantly comparing data, preliminary codes can be formed, modified and sharpened.

[17] During axial deductive coding, the preliminary codes are related to each other and theoretical concepts are used to create codes that help understanding the phenomenon under study in new ways.

[18] Selective coding is the last coding step and includes organizing the codes in a way that articulates an understanding of the phenomenon and helps contributing to, challenging or developing theory.

Anonymization

I use two different strategies to refer to the interview material, one for the leaders, activists, scholars and journalists with a high level of publicity and one for the activists with a low level of publicity as well as supporters. For the people with a high level of publicity, I did not anonymize their interviews at all. Anonymization for these research participants would have been difficult. The 'movement' in Vidarbha is not that big and any person familiar with the topic could have figured out easily who the interviewees were. I would have had to hide that the study is about Vidarbha and decontextualize the research in order to anonymize them. In addition, the interviews were not about personal or intimate issues but about political opinions and thoughts that these participants express publicly in other instances. Finally, I aim to credit them for their ideas that have become part of this research. Of course, this was done with their consent.

For the people with a low level of publicity, I used a strategy for complete anonymization. The reason for this strategy is that I assured the research participants that I would anonymize them and thus that they could freely tell me anything they thought about the respective organization. As mentioned above, I mostly interviewed people suggested by the local activist. If I would reveal the organization, landholding, caste and other information about an interviewee, it might be still possible for the local activist to figure out who it was – if he wanted to. As I did not want to reveal these details about the interviewees, giving interview numbers or another designation seemed pointless. Instead, I mention specific characteristics according to the respective topic (e.g. small/medium farmer, supporter/activist). This aims at making the arguments comprehensible. The village activists take an intermediate position and are sometimes anonymized (even the organization) when the content might possibly be delicate, and at others they have been named to credit them for their ideas.

3.4 Movement Research and Reciprocity

Regarding the research ethics relevant to this research, I discuss the issue of reciprocity. Reciprocity in research means what the research participants give to the researcher and what the latter is able to give back to them (Crow 2008). In social movement research in particular, this often relates to if and how a researcher can engage in and contribute to the social movements she/he is studying. Arguably it starts with the question of whether neutrality should or even can be aspired to or if one should take sides to begin with. As a consequence of my constructivist epistemological approach (sketched at the beginning of this chapter), I believe that it is neither possible nor desirable to be neutral. I refer here to feminist thinkers, for example, who have strongly claimed that all research is underwritten with political implications and personal intentions, be it research methods, sites or fields (see Law 2006, for an overview). My goal is to consider different perspectives and to reflect critically on one's own position and the positions of the interviewees. This is reflected in one of the objectives of this study, namely to analyse the different perceptions and ideas of 'movement' actors and to present them to a different audience.

Beyond these discussions, the question remains if and how social movement researchers should get involved with the movements they study. Some activist-scholars directly engage with the movement they are researching and generate immediate reciprocation. There is a vivid debate about the feasibility as well as the desirability of activist-scholars (see e.g. Gillan and Pickerill 2012), and there are several critical issues. First, as Dawson and Sinwell (2012) argue, promises of reciprocity can evoke expectations from the side of the research participants that the researcher is not willing or able to provide. This can harm the relationship. During my fieldwork, I constantly had to explain the limitations of my own possibilities of support because I had the impression that some 'movement' actors greatly overestimated my potential influence.

Second and more importantly, a direct involvement in the struggles and open solidarity is possible and can be beneficial in those movements, with whose demands the researcher can fully identify. But there are also the so-called ugly movements that are opposed to the political stand of the researcher, e.g. right-wing extremists. There, those who demand for reciprocity are likely to be consternated when reciprocity seems neither possible nor desirable (for an elaboration on this topic, see Gillan and Pickerill 2012, 136-137). Plows (2008, 1532-1533) nicely describes that there are many different streams in one social movement, some of which are close to the researcher's own stand while others seem insupportable. In this case, reciprocity becomes even more complicated.

In this research I experienced similar situations to the ones Plows describes. To start with, I am deeply involved with rural, agrarian and agricultural issues. It is no coincidence that I decided to study mobilisations around neoliberal policies and farmer suicides. I believe that many of the groups' demands are important and I hope to provide a different audience for them through my research. Nevertheless, I became increasingly aware that despite my focus on farmer groups, these groups had more dimensions than just the agricultural one. I realised that my lack of knowledge about many aspects of daily life and politics in the region was so considerable (in spite of my fieldwork), that I felt unable to fully understand the position of these groups beyond agricultural issues, e.g. in terms of caste-politics or their position towards Hindu nationalism (see chapter IV and VI), let alone impact them. In many incidences, I understood that some groups or certain activists support communalist, right wing politics that are opposed to my own political views.

My direct involvement in the groups' activities during fieldwork was more passive than active and often involuntary. My presence was mentioned in speeches to emphasize the importance of claims. I was in the newspaper several times without me even knowing it and it seemed to give the groups a certain relevance that a researcher from abroad would do research about them. Consequently, incidents when I was involved in the 'movement' activities then sometimes left me with a bitter taste in my mouth, despite my solidarity with some of the struggles.

To conclude, I argue that the question is not whether or not to get involved, but rather at what level. I would argue that there might be more immediate and efficient ways to

engage in social struggles than doing research about them. I agree with Croteau (2005, 20) who states that "*becoming an academic to support social movements is akin to launching a space program to develop a pen that writes upside down. At best, it is a circuitous route*." At the same time, I believe it is important as a social movement scholar to reflect how one can be relevant to the social movement one studies – and there are manifold ways to engage. Many researchers, for example, provide academically very valuable results and analyses of movements. Even if the direct benefit of this knowledge for the activists is limited, there is no point in creating a hierarchy between activist knowledge and academic knowledge. These results can also be very important for researchers to situate themselves vis-à-vis neoliberalism or capitalism and in critical support of those movements with whom they work. Additionally, they can serve to influence and change relevant policies (Fuller and Kitchin 2004; Gillan and Pickerill 2012).

It is in this realm where I see my own contribution. I can contribute to academic debates about agriculture in the times of neoliberal globalization by reflecting on perceptions and visions of farmers and activists in one marginal region. By depicting their diverse perspectives on the situation and the future of agriculture, I can enrich and critically analyse both movement debates as well as academic arguments. Particularly with regard to the former, this work emphasizes carefully listening to the grassroots.

4 Structure of the Thesis

The following chapters relate to the debates on 'agrarian crisis' in India. In chapter II, I describe the debates on agricultural and agrarian changes in India's primary sector. I show how the changes caused by the Green Revolution, the persistence of old social structures and New Economic Policies have shaped today's agriculture. Two strands of argument that are dominant in India run through this chapter. One depicts how the whole peasantry is in crisis and suffers from these new policies. The other distinguishes between different groups of farmers, of which some are in deep crisis and experience even negative profits from agriculture, while others make a good living from their agricultural activities.

In chapter III, I break down this discussion at the level of the study region of Vidarbha. After providing an overview of Vidarbha's context of and its agriculture, I analyse how the interviewed farmers themselves perceive their agricultural situation. To conclude, I link the perceptions of farmers in chapter III with the academic debates in chapter II and the statistical data in chapter III.

The following chapters IV and V relate to debates in social movement theories over the why and how of social movements as well as over possible outcomes. In chapter IV, I first give an overview of the recent rural movements in India before mapping out the current actors I found in Vidarbha. I describe the groups I focus on in more detail: what do these groups do, what demands do they have and how do they cooperate with each other? I relate these 'movement' groups to the past farmer movements. I also reflect on

whether or not these mobilisations can be called a 'movement' based on debates over what constitutes a social movement. In debates on social movements as well as in my fieldwork, one of the most important questions concerns how social movements emerge and grow in strength and why people decide to take part in them. This was the question that brought me to the importance of leaders in the context of farmer 'movement' groups in Vidarbha.

In chapter V therefore, I analyse the role of leaders in the 'movement'. First, I give an overview about debates on the role of leaders and on different leadership styles in India. Second, I analyse how leaders need to prove their trustworthiness. I analyse how supporters of the 'movement' want their leader to be a 'fixer' who is able to achieve things and is therefore close to political powers. At the same time, they expect a leader to be honest and therefore distinctly non-political. Thus, leaders try to manage a difficult balancing act between being good fixers and proving their honesty.

In the final chapters, I bring these two broad debates together. In chapter VI, the visions of 'movement' actors for the future of agriculture take centre stage. I discuss different ideas, particularly regarding the future of small/medium-scale farming in dry land areas. I analyse how these frames have changed compared to the earlier farmer movements and how they can be positioned in a global debate about the future of agriculture.

In chapter VII, I describe the phenomenon of farmer suicides. The focus lies on how the 'movement' actors interact with this topic of farmer suicides on a local as well as a discursive level. I show how these suicides have become 'public deaths' and are even understood as a 'silent movement'. I show how the suicides are used in the struggle against the neoliberal policies in central Indian farmer struggles, as are other incidents of suicides from different countries of the world.

In chapter VIII, I wrap up the thesis. I go back to the initial themes that the present study explores, some of which relate to analysing the nature of the agrarian mobilization in Vidarbha, the role of the leaders in mobilisation, the demands, visions and outcomes of the groups' struggles and so on. The thesis ends with an overall conclusion and outlook for the future.

II. Crisis of Agriculture in India

The notion of an 'agrarian crisis' is prominent in discussions on rural India. Its exact meaning, characteristics and causes, however, are subject to debate. In the first section of this chapter, I describe India's agricultural policies since independence in order to put this 'agrarian crisis' in context. In the second section, I analyse the major characteristics of this crisis. In the third section, I outline two major arguments to describe and explain the 'agrarian crisis'.

1 Agricultural Policies in India after Independence

Agricultural performance has been fluctuating sharply since independence. During the colonial period, agriculture was marked by stagnation. In the decades after independence, agriculture caught up, but showed very meagre growth rates. According to Ramakumar (2010), India's development after independence can be divided into four periods. The first is the period of National Planning from 1950–1965. The second can be called the *early Green Revolution phase* (mid–1960s to the early 1980s), followed by the *late Green Revolution phase* (from the early 1980s to early 1990s). The fourth, present period started in the early 1990s and is characterized by a shift in agricultural policies towards liberalization of domestic markets as well as international trade.

1.1 National Planning (1950 – 1965)

The central government under Prime Minister Jawaharlal Nehru introduced the 5-Year Plans, which were developed and monitored by the Planning Commission of India. The major goals initially had been to reduce regional disparities and strengthen domestic industry and production while allowing limited domestic competition. In terms of food production, the major concern was to ensure production of affordable staple foods for the urban population to enable industrial growth (Ramakumar 2010).

Srinivasan (1987) has argued that the government bought food crops from domestic suppliers below market prices and sold them at subsidized rates. The prices of agricultural goods were kept low either in order to guarantee affordable staple crops for the country's consumers, or to please the lobby of traders and industry upstream. This low procurement price was a hidden tax for the farmers. However, agriculture benefited from different subsidies in return: agricultural income was tax-free; land taxation was negligible as were charges for irrigation water from publicly funded reservoirs. Nevertheless, this indirect taxing of agriculture points to the so–called urban bias (see also Braverman and Kanbur 1987). Authors like Lewis (1954) pointed out that the agricultural sector was reduced to playing the role of a provider of food and labour to industry in the development literature and was not considered an area of growth in itself. According to Corbridge and Jones (2010, 7) the goal was to extract a significant net flow of resources from agriculture, particularly in the Second and Third Five-Year Plans.

Varshney (1993) countered that because in India democracy came before industrialization, policies marked by an urban bias were abandoned after two Five-Year Plans. Successive governments had been unable to enforce pricing that was against the interests of farmers. Rather, as Ramakumar (2010) argued, agricultural policies based on subsidized inputs such as fertilizers, diesel, electricity and credit were promoted in the first three Five-Year Plans. A particular focus was on increasing public investments in irrigation – the importance of which declined continuously after the First Plan.

Consequently, yields did increase during the period of National Planning. However, Ramakumar argues that this was not through increasing productivity, but mostly through an increase of the area under cultivation. The latter – and with it the growth of yields – plateaued in the 1960s.

1.2 New Agricultural Strategy (mid-1960s – 1990s)

This plateau in production growth, together with a growing population, led to a major food crisis in the mid-1960s. Thus, a New Agricultural Strategy was introduced in order to achieve growth in the agricultural sector. This heralded the era of the so-called Green Revolution (mid-1960s to early 1990s). The state supported High Yielding Variety (HYV) seeds, chemical fertilizers, pesticides, mechanization, irrigation, and cheap credit in order to intensify agricultural production (Baker and Jewitt 2007; Mishra 2008). On the one hand, the New Agricultural Strategy was firmly rooted in the adoption of new technology provided by the State. On the other hand, it relied heavily on state support for four major areas of agricultural markets. First, prices of agricultural outputs were subjected to controls. For that purpose, the Agricultural Pricing Commission was established in order to advise the government about the best prices for incentivizing the adoption of technology. The Minimum Support Price (MSP) and Maximum Retail Price came into existence. Second, the state nationalized commercial banks. These new public banks consequently spread geographically and increased their functional reach. This led to increased credit availability particularly in rural areas and weakened the position of the moneylenders. Third, the state regulated prices of inputs like fertilizers, pesticides and electricity for irrigation. Fourth, the marketing of farm products was regulated to avoid market distortions. The Agricultural Produce and Marketing Committee Act of 1963 and the Essential Commodities Act 1955 allowed for a number of regulated markets to develop – one of which was the Maharashtra State Co–operative Cotton Growers Marketing Federation Limited (MSCCGMF) (see chapter III). In the early phase of the Green Revolution, agricultural growth rates were modest and below those experienced during the preceding phase of National Planning. The stagnation of less fertile regions would not be compensated by the high performance of more fertile ones. However, in the 1980s, the late phase of Green Revolution, agriculture recovered. As the Green Revolution spread to more regions and crops, grain yields increased (Ramakumar 2010).

Some authors, most prominently Prabhat Patnaik, argued that in the phase of the Green Revolution, existing inequalities were further aggravated. Even if there was an increase in agricultural production and the availability of food grains, this happened in a highly

iniquitous manner. Patnaik (1975) argued that the Green Revolution was unequal in three respects. First, it benefited affluent farmers more than the small and marginal ones, the landless, and the poor. Green Revolution technologies such as HYV seeds, chemical fertilizer and pesticides were only accessible to farmers who already had sufficient resources and could mobilize these to invest in new technology. Furthermore, in order to generate more yields with those technologies, a high level of knowledge and access to extension services were required (see also Griffin and Ghose 1979; Jodhka 1994). The general debate about whether or not the Green Revolution has increased poverty is vast and controversial (for an overview see Das 2002). However, the Green Revolution's tendency to increase inequality is not disputed.

Consequently, as Rao (1994) argues, the limitations of the New Agricultural Strategy were that it exacerbated structural inequalities and focused too heavily on the supply side. It therefore neglected property relations (e.g. in land) and popular demand for food. An impressive example for the importance of such structural limitations and how these can be overcome is West Bengal. There, the Communist Party of India (Marxist) was in power and tenancy reforms were implemented much more successfully than elsewhere. Ramachandran, Swaminathan and Rawal (2003) showed that West Bengal had the highest growth rate in agricultural production of all States in the late Green Revolution period. And this performance could be traced back to tenancy reforms rather than technological progress (see also Banerjee, Gertler, and Ghatak 2002). Therefore, the Green Revolution, together with the land reforms (see section 1.4 below), arguably benefited a group of landed farmers that can be described as "*bullock-capitalists*". Their influence grew in the 1970s (Rudolph and Rudolph 1987), particularly in farmer movements in India (see section 2.3, chapter IV).

Second, the Green Revolution mainly focused on rice and wheat, leaving other crops behind. Thus, Green Revolution technologies brought advantages but only under very particular agricultural conditions and for particular crops. The soil needed to be rich for the high-yield varieties to grow, optimal irrigation was essential, and sufficient amounts of chemical fertilizers and pesticides applied continuously were required to support the monocultures. In the absence of these conditions, effects on yields were much lower. Third and closely connected to the second, the Green Revolution favoured areas with favourable environmental conditions – specifically plain, irrigable areas with good soils. This pointed to the increasing inequality between regions caused by the Green Revolution. Finally, there were major environmental hazards related to the Green Revolution. Excessive use of nitrogen-based fertilizer led to nitration and eutrophication of rivers and lakes. Irresponsible use of pesticides posed a health risk for large rural populations, farmers and agricultural labour in particular. Further, this mode of agriculture was highly energy-intensive: energy was needed to produce nitrogen-based fertilizer and operate agricultural machinery, as well as for irrigation. Particularly in cases when Green Revolution technology was applied to some extent in dryland areas (e.g. for sorghum or cotton), it led to water scarcity and soil erosion – both major issues

in India (for a comprehensive literature review see Glaeser 2011; Le Mons Walker 2008).

1.3 New Economic Policies (from 1990s onwards)

After the Indian financial crisis in 1991, the government introduced new policies of stabilization and structural adjustment supported by the Bretton–Woods institutions (called the New Economic Policies). Some economists together with these international finance institutions started to argue that the terms of trade were skewed against agriculture: the combination of input subsidies and price support for output had kept domestic prices low and hampered production. According to the neo-classical ideology, opening up and liberalizing agricultural markets would allow prices to adjust to world market prices. This in turn would provide incentives for farmers to produce more and adopt new technologies, finally leading to increased agricultural efficiency. Furthermore, India would start producing where its comparative advantages lay, namely in export-oriented horticulture and floriculture. Consequently, the goal was to cut input subsidies as well as price support – leaving the provision of food for the people with less income to the private economy (Parikh 1997; Pursell and Gulati 1993).

These economic policies coincided with a major withdrawal of the state. The removal of trade barriers and cuts in subsidies were not the only measures introduced during the New Economic Policies. First, in the field of domestic trade, the marketing system was considered to be discriminatory against farmers. State–managed buying agencies were seen as inhibiting contact between the big private buyers and farmers. Thus, monopoly procurement schemes, i.e. when the state acts as the only buyer, and similar policies were abolished. Second, the financial sector was liberalized and deregulated, reversing the above-mentioned nationalization of banks. This had severe consequences on the availability of credit in rural areas and the expansion of rural credit halted. This development paved the way for the return of the informal sector. Third and fourth, public expenditures on agricultural research and extension decreased. These tasks were taken over by private corporations, public-private partnerships, and NGOs. The fifth point leads directly to the next section: land ceiling laws were seen as inhibiting modernisation of the agricultural sector. Thus, many states abolished or loosened them. Such measures were intended to achieve economies of scale and attract potential investors (Ramakumar 2010).

To summarize, the New Economic Policies were supposed to encourage a shift in cropping patterns, foster trade, attract private investment in all areas of agriculture, thereby renewing Indian agriculture, as well as increase incomes in rural areas. Their consequences, as I will show later, are subject to debate. However, these neoliberal policies should not draw attention away from another set of policies that were crucial in the agricultural context: land reforms.

1.4 Land Reforms

In the phase of National Planning, the state had promised to remove the middlemen and redistribute land. While the state was quite successful in the former through laws as

well as compensation payments, the latter was a major failure. Nehruvian economic planning and its state interventionism promised to change power relations in India's rural areas. This included land distribution, public resource provision, employment policies, introduction of new technologies, and infrastructural improvements. All these goals were "*premised on the expropriation of the landlord class and the transformation of tenant usufruct rights into ownership*" (Mohanty 2005, 250; Rajasekaran 1998). The Tenancy Act in the 1950s legally abolished all tenures and terminated all tenancy arrangements. Landlords could only retain the land they were cultivating themselves. Tenants were declared owners of the land they had been leasing and tenancy was allowed only up to one year's duration; by the end of the year, the tenant would own the land. The Land Ceiling Act in the 1960s then defined an upper limit to landholdings allowed for one individual[19] (Mohanty 2001).

There has been a lot of talk – and struggle – related to land reforms in India after independence. Despite these ambitious laws and some minor successes, land reforms in India have been a major failure. The Indian state failed to end the extreme concentration of land ownership. According to data of the Annual Report of the Ministry of Rural Development, out of 63 million acres that would have been subject to redistribution in the mid–1950s according to ceiling laws, only 4.89 million acres were in fact redistributed, less than 2% of the cultivated area. Moreover, more than 20% of the redistributed land was in West Bengal, a state under a leftist government and well known for its successful implementation of land reforms (Mishra 2007; Ramachandran 2011). According to data from the NSS Surveys of Employment and Unemployment, the Gini coefficient[20] for land ownership increased from 0.74 in 1993-94 to 0.75 in 2004-05 and eventually to 0.78 in 2011-12 – indicating an increasingly unequal land distribution (Rawal 2013). Rawal also showed that the share of *Dalits* and Muslims in total land under cultivation is much lower than their share in the total number of households and that this disparity has not decreased.

In terms of land reforms, many scholars see a reversal of land reforms, namely a growing concentration of land ownership. The official policies are about to jettison the goals of land reform, e.g. through the abolition of land ceiling laws (or the increase of the ceilings) that makes absentee farming possible again. In Maharashtra, for example, the land ceiling law is still in place. However, it is not valid for corporations, only for natural persons. Consequently, there is less land for redistribution, while at the same time we can observe an accelerated loss of land. Even official data shows such a gap between potential and real performance (Rajasekaran 2004; Ramachandran 2011). Ramachandran (2011, 60) showed that in some areas the modest successes are even

[19] These ceiling laws are: 18 acres of irrigated land; 27 acres of land without assured perennial supply of water for irrigation, but assured water supply for one crop; 36 acres of land, with unassured water supply; or 54 acres of dry crop land.

[20] The Gini coefficient measures what percentage of the population is in possession of what percentage of a resource – in this case, land. If the Gini coefficient is 0, a society is perfectly equal. The closer it comes to 1, the higher is the inequality.

being reversed. Furthermore, he reported reverse tenancy, i.e. that small landowners lease out land to big landholders, particularly in areas where the former lack the resources to take advantage of technology.

In this section, it is clear that agricultural policies after independence have been subject to many shifts. How, then, do these link to the "agrarian crisis"?

2 Symptoms of the "Agrarian Crisis"

In this section, I analyse the major symptoms of the "agrarian crisis" in India. These include issues at the level of agricultural economy, the rural credit system, public investment and expenditure, as well as the depletion of natural resources.

Before starting, I want to make a general point about the importance of agriculture and landholding in rural areas, because landholding will figure prominently in this section and beyond. The sub-section below will also serve to explain the classification of landholdings I use.

2.1 Classification of Landholdings

Certainly, landholding is not the only basis of income or wealth in rural India today. Non-agricultural income is an important part of people's total income, be it rural manufacturing, construction or remittances (Misra 2013). The importance of and access to non-agricultural income differs depending on many factors like education, wealth and/or caste (Lanjouw and Shariff 2004, 4443). Further, it also depends on the profitability of agriculture. In rain-fed areas for example, people are more dependent on non-agricultural income than in irrigated areas. Still, even in those rain-fed regions, non-farm employment constitutes only up to half of the total household income, leaving the other half to agriculture (Bhakar and Singh 2013, 83-84).

Even if the importance of agricultural income has decreased significantly and landholding does not solely determine peoples' income, agriculture still counts for a major part of people's incomes. Azam and Shariff (2011) conclude that "*farm income continues to be the most important source of income and income inequality in rural India*" (*ibid*, 5). Yet in the context of this thesis, I consider it appropriate to talk about different groups of farmers depending on their landholdings. In classifying landholdings, I adopt the system of the Government of India (GoI 2012), adjusted by (Arora 2001). The classification has five different categories of farmers:

- rich farmers: large landholdings above 25 acres (mainly living on rent, labour working on their land)
- medium farmers: Medium landholdings between 10 and 25 acres (working on their own land through which they eke out their living, may occasionally hire labour)
- semi–medium farmers: Medium landholdings between 5 and 10 acres (working on their own land, may occasionally hire labour, and also work as labourers on others' fields)

- small farmers: Small landholdings between 2.5 and 5 acres (working on their own land, but also working as labourers on others' fields)
- marginal farmers and agricultural labourers: marginal landholdings below 2.5 acres and the landless (working on their own land and/or as labourers on others' fields)

I am aware of bypassing the vast debate about a meaningful classification of farmers (see Shah (2004a) for a detailed overview). The above classification, for example, is criticised for not differentiating between groups of farmers with regards to nature and extent of land ownership, non-agricultural sources of livelihoods or between irrigated and rain–fed land.

This also points to the relative usage of the terms *peasant* and *farmer*. I use *farmer* throughout the present study, with the only exception of fixed expressions (like old peasant movements), when rephrasing authors that explicitly used the word peasant or when talking about the 'peasantry'. I begin by stressing that I do not agree with scholars who argue that at times it is more important to acknowledge the homogeneity rather than heterogeneity of the peasantry (see e.g. Colburn 1989). The impact of neoliberal reorganisation worldwide is differentiated along class lines in rural societies. I am aware that India is no exception, especially because of the unique history of its land and agrarian system, where the independent state in India did not put a decisive end to feudal power and, unsurprisingly, the project of redistributive land reforms was a failure. The choice of 'farmers' against 'peasant' denotes an ideological position too. The emphasis and usage of peasantry as a class that is uniformly affected by neoliberal policies masks the deeper inequality that has historically characterised Indian agriculture.

I consider it crucial to differentiate between the different groups of farmers whenever possible. However, the differentiation between classes within agriculture in this thesis remains rather elementary, because my focus remains on 'movement groups' and their mobilisation strategies. Keeping this in mind, over the course of the thesis, I highlight the perceptions of various groups of farmers with regard to the overall identity of a united peasantry, agriculture, their future, and state policies.

In Marathi, the language of most of the interviews, this distinction does not exist. Interviewees used the word *kisan* to talk about peasants and farmers. To keep as close as possible to the peoples' native language and to avoid putting unintended meaning in their statements, I use *kisan* as well whenever I directly quote from interviews. Consequently and lastly, I use farmers instead of peasants because, as we will see in later chapters, farmers generally identify themselves as belonging to a class within the larger group known as farmers/*kisans*.

2.2 Profitability, Trade and Production

Despite the neoliberal New Economic Policies, India still provides market support for farmers, though currently this support is being dismantled. The central government's Commission for Agricultural Costs and Prices (CACP) defines Minimum Support Prices

for agricultural products every year for different crops and qualities. The goals are to guarantee an income for the farmers and to balance against the high volatility of international prices for agricultural raw materials (Shroff 2006). The state, i.e. its procurement agencies, is supposed to guarantee these MSPs to the producers in case market prices drop below the defined MSP. Further, a Maximum Retail Price is defined for the products to be sold to consumers to protect them from high prices and bridle the power of middlemen and traders.

Within this system, different crops are guaranteed protection to a different extent: for rice, the domestic price is far below the international price; for wheat, it is on a similar level but less volatile; for sugar, it is far beyond the international price, while for cotton it more or less follows the international price. This clearly reflects the differential policies still used by the government to protect different interests (Mittal 2006).

The CACP defines these MSPs whilst considering the cost of production, demand and supply, trends in market prices, inter–crop price parity, as effects on the cost of living. The commission uses both macro- and aggregated micro–level data, communicating with other ministries, state governments, academic institutions, and select organizations (CACP 2013). Basing the calculation of the MSP mostly on the costs of production (CACP 2011) makes sense from the perspective of protecting farmer income. However, it is being criticized for distorting the market of agricultural products (see e.g. Chand 2003). Still, as MSPs have increased in recent years, this has not necessarily meant that farmers are better off. Agricultural profitability depends on whether the increase in MSP could offset increases in the costs of production in the 2000s. Profitability in rice and wheat, for example, is likely to have shrunk (Dev and Rao 2010, Ramakumar 2014); for cotton, see section 2.3, chapter III.

A problem of the MSPs is that the yields per acre differ greatly among the different regions, crops and farmers. For many farmers, MSPs do not even compensate for the actual costs of production. Ramachandran (2011) found that as much as 21% of (mostly poor) farmers earn negative crop incomes. At the same time, the incomes of big landholders in most villages are high. In a village case, the agricultural income in the top decile of villagers was more than Rs 3.2 lakh per household per year (Ramachandran 2011; Ramakumar 2010).

Beyond the farm gate, prices are increasingly dependent on world market prices. Cotton serves as a good illustration: until the late 1990s, less than 2% of the domestic cotton production was imported, whereas in the early 2000s it was already more than 10%. At the same time, India has become a net-exporter of cotton due to a rise in domestic production (Ramakumar 2014). Consequently, liberalization also imported the volatility of international prices.

Even without considering international trade and world market prices, the relationship between the price and output of agricultural produce is highly contested. In other words, the supply responsiveness of farmers is far from clear. Non–price factors such as inputs, technology, institutions, or infrastructure might play a bigger role in the growth

of agricultural output. Chand (2004) also showed that price increases alone do not result in output growth. They need to be combined with technological development and diffusion, input use, and irrigation. Additionally, it is highly questionable if the current world market price for raw materials is a reliable indicator for future prices (Ramakumar 2010).

Therefore, world market prices bearing the risk of high uncertainty tend to provide wrong signals for cultivation decisions and may lead to ecologically unsustainable and economically unviable cropping patterns. Apart from the higher volatility, prices have also fallen. After the mid–1990s, the domestic prices of many agricultural goods fell sharply, e.g. prices of cotton, tea, coffee, spices and horticultural products (Ramakumar 2010; Sen and Bhatia 2004).

At the same time, the period of liberalization brought promises of increasing exports for cash crops. Since the 1950s, the share in gross cropped area[21] cultivated with food crops has declined steadily, particularly after the mid-1970s. Starting in the 1980s, there has been a fall even in the absolute number of hectares used for cultivation of food grains and pulses. At the same time, the area used for cultivating fruits and vegetables has been increasing. This means that the cropping pattern has changed from low–value crops to high-value commercial crops (Ramakumar 2010).

This decline in food grain cultivation has coincided with a steep fall in food grain consumption in rural areas. At the same time, the per capita consumption of fruits, vegetables, dairy products and meat in rural areas increased. To interpret this as a voluntary change in dietary patterns would be misleading, because the per capita calorie consumption in rural areas has fallen since the 1990s. This decline was sharpest for the lowest 30% of households with respect to consumer expenditure. This indicates that the fall in per capita food grain consumption happened not by choice but by distress and indicates increasing malnutrition[22] (GoI 2007; Ramakumar 2010).

There have been two distinct sub-phases in the growth of agricultural production after 1992-93. In the 1990s, agricultural growth rates slowed down significantly but they revived in the period after 2002-03 (Ramakumar 2014, Lerche 2015, 50). This revival, however, did not raise the growth rates of agricultural production of the combined phase of the 1990s and 2000s over the 1980s. In this combined period, for the first time after independence the rate of agricultural growth fell behind the growth of population (Ramakumar 2014). Agricultural productivity (namely, total factor productivity[23]) shows a similar development. While its growth decreased in the 1990s, it increased again in the 2000s but could not reach the level of the 1980s (Binswanger-Mkhize

[21] The gross cropped area is the total area sown once and/or more than once in a particular year, i.e. the area is counted as many times as there are sowings in a year.

[22] Patnaik (2008) calculated that the percentage of the rural population unable to access the required 2,400 calories per day increased from 75% in 1993-94 to 87% in 2004-05.

[23]The total factor productivity is the portion of output not explained by the amount of inputs used in production. If all inputs are accounted for, then total factor productivity can be taken as a measure of long-term technological change.

2013). Despite the substantial increases in these macro level indicators in the 2000s compared to the 1990s, many individual farmers have remained distressed.

The afore-mentioned shift in cropping patterns towards cash crops went hand-in-hand with a shift towards high-yield varieties and genetically modified crops. Those seeds are more expensive and require a different method of production. It is intensive in terms of time, money, knowledge and thus extension. On the one hand, this means that farmers are increasingly dependent on input markets, which feature scarcely regulated private and informal sources. On the other, it leads to increasing costs of production – particularly the cash component of these costs (Reddy and Mishra 2010b).

Increasing input costs are a serious problem for many farmers – particularly those in rain-fed areas, who do not have access to irrigation and therefore no secured yields. Farmers need to deal with the uncertainties of the market, invest in inputs and cope with crop failures. However, at the same time, availability of affordable credit is very low. This leads to a high percentage of farmers falling into debt traps.

2.3 Indebtedness and the Credit System

During the New Economic Policies period, the financial sector was liberalized as well. The banks were supposed to work on a commercial basis: profitability had become their major concern so they got permission to close their rural branches. Consequently, the credit supply and number of rural branches fell sharply in the 1990s, which led to the resurgence of moneylenders and the informal credit system (Chavan 2005; Ramakumar and Chavan 2007; Sadanandan 2014, 302).

At the same time, microcredit entered the credit system. There is a large debate about the impact of microcredit. In a review, Ghosh (2013) argued that it cannot be seen as a silver bullet and is rather problematic. Ramachandran (2011) postulated that microcredit has two major disadvantages. First, borrowers often use these very small loans for temporary consumption shortfalls instead of long–term productive investments. This forces them into a debt trap. Second, with interest rates similar to those of informal lenders, microloans are expensive for borrowers. In its beginning, the microcredit sector was mostly led by NGOs and financed by formal–sector banks. All credit–linked schemes from the government were implemented through self–help groups. Additionally, Ghosh (2013) argued that microcredit needs to be subsidised and regulated by the state if it is to be successful. However, in recent years, microcredit has awakened private corporate interest and many non–banking finance companies obtain cheap credit from formal–sector banking institutions in order to finance microcredit capital (Ramachandran 2011).

In the 2000s, rural credit volume expanded but was highly skewed in favour of the rural rich and large businesses. A large portion of the increase was due to indirect loans[24] in new areas such as new forms of financing commercial export-oriented and capital-

[24] *Indirect loan* refers to any loan that is transferred from a dealer (who originated the loan) to a third party.

intensive agriculture, where the loans are given to corporations and partnership groups within the ambit of agricultural credit. This means that agricultural loans moved away from marginal, small or medium farmers towards large agri-business interests (Ramakumar and Chavan 2014). Together with New Economic Policies, this points to a drive to privatise, generating new incomes for rich commercial farmers and corporations (Ramachandran 2011).

Consequently, Reddy and Mishra (2010b) argued that the incidence as well as volume of indebtedness increases with landholding. Compared to the rich farmers, marginal and small farmers rely much more on high-interest bearing non-institutional agencies. The share of credit for marginal farmers in total credit volume decreased, which indicates that credit access is particularly difficult for them (Ramakumar and Chavan 2014; Reddy and Mishra 2010b). The combination of the state retreating from the credit sector and farmers becoming increasingly dependent on cash for cultivation leaves many – particularly small and marginal farmers – at the mercy of unscrupulous moneylenders.

2.4 Public and Private Investment and Public Expenditures

Not only did investment by the financial sector in agriculture decline, but public investment in agriculture as a share of the agricultural Gross Domestic Product also declined steadily from the early 1980s until 2004-05. Following this long period of decline, investment increased moderately for three years, only to fall again after 2006-07. Consequently, public investment in 2010-11 was lower than in 2004-05 as well as in the early 1980s. Private investment (i.e. investment by private entities) stagnated in the 1980s, increased moderately in the 1990s, and grew rapidly in the 2000s. In the 1990s, the increase in private investment was not enough to compensate for the simultaneous fall of public investment, but in the 2000s, but it helped account for increases in total investments. However, a smaller section of cultivators accounted for the rise in private investment than in the 1980s, which has been used mainly for well construction. At the same time, the state had largely withdrawn input subsidies while increasing subsidies for electricity – again prioritizing those farmers who can afford a private well (Ramakumar 2010; Ramakumar 2014).

Additionally, there was a decline in public expenditure for research and education, extension, storage/warehousing, and soil and water conservation since the 1990s (Dixit 2012)[25]. This long-term decline had ominous impacts on agricultural growth. Even the Planning Commission of the Government of India states that the slow growth in the 1990s was due to the weakened support system in agriculture (Ramakumar 2010). Historically, the government was largely responsible for these domains, but the new policies were intended to encourage the private sector and replace public-sector institutions by competitive, demand–driven extension networks. Consequently, the share of expenditure on agriculture in total national expenditure is likely to have fallen

[25] For a detailed overview of the government schemes, see the India Rural Development Report 2012/2013 (IDFC 2013).

in the 1990s and 2000s (Ramakumar 2014)[26] while at the same time control of private firms over agricultural research and extension increased. However, private research covers only a small sub–set of needs of the small and marginal farmers. The technology developed by private enterprises is likely to be more suitable for capital–intensive forms of commercial agriculture. Furthermore, the remaining public resources were removed from food crops and shifted to high–value, export–oriented crops (Ramachandran and Rawal 2009). Even stronger than during the Green Revolution, research tends to neglect issues relevant for rain-fed agriculture and the public sector must address the needs of resource-poor farmers in less endowed regions (Dev 2012).

Despite the withdrawal of the state during the 1990s and 2000s, one major public scheme was introduced in 2005: The Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act (MGNREGA). With this Act, the state guarantees 100 days of wage employment (mostly unskilled manual work) per year to every household. This scheme has grown to hold immense importance in rural areas of India and there is a large debate about its strengths, weaknesses and impacts– many of them remaining inconclusive [see Banerjee (2015) for a recent article particularly about Maharashtra; also see Ranaware et al. (2015)].

2.5 Irrigation and the Depletion of Resources

The changing cropping patterns and modes of production coincide with a dwindling resource base, particularly soil and water. Because of intensive cultivation practices or malpractices such as excess use of chemical fertilizer and the extension of cultivation to marginal areas, land degradation and soil erosion are a growing problem in India, with the proportion of degraded land increasing (Reddy and Mishra 2010b).

When it comes to water, the main problems are, on the one hand, poor drainage and floods during or immediately after the monsoons. On the other hand, the fields need to be irrigated in order to produce reliable yields (see Rodell, Velicogna, and Famiglietti 2009). Despite an urgent need, the government does not take steps to improve irrigation and there is an absence of public investment in surface irrigation (Ramakumar 2014). Farmers still invest high sums to drill wells in order to access groundwater aquifers (Harriss-White 2008; Rao 2008). Through groundwater irrigation in the absence of a sustainable recharge of wells, surface irrigation, and water conservation structures, groundwater reserves undergo irreversible depletion. Consequently, there is an acute scarcity of water in the summer months (Ramakumar 2014). This indicates that a neglect of infrastructure for surface irrigation and the overemphasis on private borewells leads to severe problems – particularly in dryland and drought-prone areas like Vidarbha.

[26] Ramakumar (2014) argued that at the level of the central government the share of expenditure on agriculture clearly increased in the 2000s after having stagnated in the 1990s. For state governments, the share has fallen steeply. Considering that the states are more important in agriculture than the central government, he reached the conclusion that the total share has decreased overall.

An increasing pumping depth and decreasing well yield translates into higher costs and risks for a farmer investing in a borewell, which, after some time will cease supplying water. Even here the risks are unevenly distributed: the more capital a farmer has, the deeper he or she can afford to drill. One solution would be to stop relying solely on borewell irrigation, which has become more important in recent decades, and invest more in surface irrigation, water harvesting, and conservation. However, this is clearly not happening in rural India (Daftary 2013; see also Kulkarni, Shah, and Shankar 2015). Apart from the decreasing groundwater level, an overuse of groundwater without investment in other irrigation measures can also lead to a loss of soil fertility, acute problems of salinity and resultant yield stagnation (Ramakumar 2014). Last but not least, borewell irrigation requires a lot of power, without which it is dysfunctional (Birner, Gupta, and Sharma 2011; Reddy and Mishra 2010b). This again increases production costs for farmers and makes agricultural operations dependent on electricity supply, which is often insufficient in rural areas due to load shedding. To conclude, Taylor (2013) argues that groundwater depletion "*represents a common tragedy of debt-driven livelihoods within an austere agrarian environment*" (ibid, 691).

Picture 1: A rain fed, dry land cotton field in Vidarbha

Last but not least, there is one more alleged 'symptom' of the 'agrarian crisis': the so-called farmer suicides. Arguably, a wave of farmer suicides has swept the Indian countryside since the introduction of neo-liberal policies in the 1990s. Many researchers, activists and politicians see a direct causal relationship between these policies and the farmer suicides. It is, however, a complex phenomenon that I will analyse in detail in chapter VII.

This section has shown that the situation of farmers in India is severe and it would appear justified to describe it as a crisis. The causes of this crisis and the way it affects different groups of farmers are disputed. Apart from the academic debate, this crisis also figures prominently in political debates and among farmer activists. To understand them, I will analyse the different arguments in the next section.

3 'Agrarian Crisis': Understanding the Ideological Debates

The debates about the 'agrarian crisis' began in the 1990s, because the neoliberal New Economic Policies were largely seen as having severely aggravated – or even triggered – the crisis. However, many authors argue that the roots of the current problems lie in historically unequal land relations and oppressive social structures that have never been dismantled. This leads to a set of questions about the nature and consequences of this 'agrarian crisis': Is agriculture as a whole discriminated against and therefore, are all farmers regardless of their landholdings, regions and crops suffering from the so–called 'agrarian crisis' equally? Or are some groups of farmers suffering, while others are flourishing? In the following, I specifically discuss these two different lines of arguments.

I start with the first argument that paints a picture of the whole agricultural sector as being in crisis, and globalisation as well as liberalization creating a situation where agriculture becomes unprofitable, even for big capitalist farmers. In India, this argument, particularly in the debates of the New Farmers' Movements (see chapter IV, section 2.3), still echoes the debate of the urban bias vs. agrarian (neo-) populism.

3.1 Urban Bias and Neo-Populism

The idea of juxtaposing the countryside with urban areas is old. In the context of India, it was most famously Gandhi who viewed the urban lifestyle pejoratively, demonized hospitals, railways and industrial machinery while suggesting that it was only in villages that "*civilization*" could be nurtured (Corbridge and Jones 2010). In the late 1960s and 1970s, Lipton (1977) initiated the urban bias debate and broke with the romanticism of Gandhi and others by pointing towards the underdevelopment of rural areas. The theory of urban bias says that the unequal distribution of resources is inefficient, because the marginal returns in developmental investments are higher in rural areas. The urban bias is then "(*a) an allocation, to persons or organizations located in towns, of shares of resources so large as to be inefficient and inequitable, or (b) a disposition among the powerful to allocate resources in this way*" (Lipton as cited in Corbridge and Jones 2010, 9). In India, the debate about the hidden tax for farmers (see section 1.1 in this chapter) relies on the same assumptions.

Corbridge and Jones (2010) reviewed the debate of urban bias and found a renewed interest (see also Byres 2004) in the idea that the current economic and political system discriminates against the agricultural sector. Lipton (1977) argued that this bias has been dominant in developing economies since the 1950s and has been nurtured by economic theories emphasizing the importance of industrial production. First, with the shift in orientation away from a heavy dependence on primary commodities towards

industrialization and import substitution strategies, agriculture has been put at a disadvantage. The artificially overvalued currency did support domestic industries by making imports and machinery under-priced, but this meant that the terms of trade moved against agriculture, particularly for export-oriented agriculture, making their crops worthless. Second, the states' attempts to buy all food crops in order to provide urban dwellers with cheap food further fuelled the so-called price twist. Lipton argued that for these two reasons, goods and services from rural areas are systematically under-priced in reference to a hypothetical free market price (Corbridge and Jones 2010).

In 2002, Lipton revised his urban bias hypothesis (Eastwood and Lipton 2002). The authors admitted that the Green Revolution on the one hand and liberalization of agricultural markets on the other have improved the terms of trade for primary products. However, as Bezemer and Headey (2008, 1354) argued, the urban bias of the 1970s and 1980s, with price regimes favouring urban over rural areas, still persisted due to international trade regimes. However, they agreed that the urban bias still exists and has evolved. Eastwood and Lipton described it as having become a distributional urban bias and claim that because the elite is still concentrated in urban areas, powerful groups have managed to channel public policies in such a way that urban areas profit disproportionally. Therefore, they concluded that rural areas still lag behind in many aspects, e.g. in health and literacy. Bezemer and Headey emphasized the new urban bias as an anti-agriculture-bias and argued that this bias intensified in the areas of government expenditures and foreign aid, particularly in the poorest countries.

3.2 Urban Bias: A Critique

The hypothesis of a general discrimination against rural areas or the agricultural sector has been criticised on many grounds. Corbridge and Jones (2010) named three major points of criticism against the idea of urban bias. First, a focus on urban bias underestimates urban poverty and more concretely neglects the urban poor. They argued that data is difficult to find and interpret, but evidence suggests that urban poverty is increasing and food insecurity is deteriorating in urban areas – in many places even faster than rural poverty. This might imply that the urban poor cannot benefit from the urban bias as much as before; or, that small-scale farmers are not in a position to profit from the improved terms of trade. Second, the definition of what is urban and what is rural is not straightforward. Depending on the definition, measurements and data used, the results can differ significantly. According to Satterthwaite (2004), India has an urban population of between 30% and 60% , depending on how the settlements between 2,000 and 20,000 inhabitants are classified. Third, "rururban" economies and cross-sectoral livelihood strategies are becoming increasingly important.

Another critique goes against the implicit tendency to treat the "*rural*" or farmers as a group with uniform interests. If one looks closely, Lipton's hypothesis is based on the idea "*that ordinary small-farmers* [sic] *in countries like India, hard-working, rational and innovative, were unable to secure a fair return for their efforts because of systematic policy*

discrimination against the countryside" (Corbridge and Jones 2010, 8). So the urban bias hypothesis from the beginning acknowledged it is particularly the smallholders who are discriminated against. Nonetheless, the whole hypothesis is based on the idea of a rural-urban divide. Lipton attempted to include the issues of inequality within urban and rural areas respectively by calling the rural elite members of the "*urban class*" and urban poor as part of the "*rural class*". This brought him major criticism. Authors like Griffin (1977) charged that Lipton's concept of class was untenable. The attempt to differentiate between rural and urban areas in terms of classes neither adds to conceptual clarity nor strengthens the argument.

The last critique is linked to the role of the rural elite. Byres (1979) argued that despite Lipton's attempt to include the rural elite in his concept, he had underestimated their power – particularly in India. In fact, the middle and rich strata of the Indian farmers have had powerful organizations to lobby for their interests. The idea of the urban bias, arguably glossing over class differentiation in rural areas and calling for more support for agriculture in general, was met with a huge response among organisations of these strata of the farmers. Most prominently, the leaders of the New Farmers' Movements (see part IV) asserted their view and developed the argument further. Sharad Joshi, an important farmer leader (see part IV) in Maharashtra, strongly argued that the battle in India was between urban *India* and rural *Bharat* (Arora 2001; Byres 1988). These ideas are still prominent among activists of groups mobilizing around agricultural issues.

In many publications, the ideas of the urban bias are still very important. Some authors make it explicit. Gail Omvedt for example argues that "*agriculture has continued to be discriminated against, and this has had the consequence of maintaining often severe rural poverty even in the face of economic development. (…) India's urban bias has remained in place.*" (Omvedt 2005, 198). But it is also present when Deshpande and Arora (2010) in the introduction to their book "*Agrarian Crisis and Farmers Suicides*" state that "*farmers as a group today feel let down by the policies of the State that puts them relatively in a disadvantageous position. This is made abundantly clear by many analysts in the recent past*" (ibid, p3).

Other authors do not talk about the urban bias, but nurture the idea that farmers – as one group – are disadvantaged by policies and markets. Vasavi (2009) for example writes that in globalized markets, other countries would produce much cheaper – "*leaving no scope for the sons of the soil either in domestic or international markets"* (ibid, p190). These authors do, elsewhere in their texts, acknowledge that the crisis does not affect all farmers the same way but is more severe for small and marginal farmers or rain-fed agriculture. Still, the 'agrarian crisis' is seen rooted in a general neglect of the countryside. Desphande and Arora (2010), immediately after the citation above, add that

> *"in other words, it is not that the state is discriminatory against the farmers as a group, but the policies are sufficiently provocative in widening the gap between the net incomes of farmers and agricultural laborers on the one hand and the remaining professions on the other. This has culminated in severe distress across the country" (ibid, 3)*

Emphasizing the deterioration of the whole agricultural sector bears the danger of hiding away the tremendous differences within rural society.

3.3 Differentiation of Farmers

The other argument about the 'agrarian crisis' emphasizes that the picture of an undifferentiated crisis affecting agriculture in general is highly misleading. Rather, different crops, regions and farmers are affected very differently, and some still flourish. Ramachandran (2011) argued that certain rural classes, namely the big landholders and capitalist farmers[27], continue to reap high incomes from agriculture. It is the small and marginal farmers in particular who suffer from the crisis, due to old agrarian inequalities combined with the New Economic Policies. He stated powerfully that some authors would conclude

> *"in the post-1991 period, differentiation in the rural economy is no longer occurring, and has been replaced by 'immiserisation' of the peasantry. (…) In the first place, it [this formulation] represents a category confusion, since there is no reason why differentiation need be inconsistent with immiserisation." (ibid, 71)*

On the contrary, he argued that the record of production and investment crisis of post–liberalisation agriculture is an exacerbation of older trends with new policy measures. Consequently, it is not an undifferentiated crisis across all regions, crops, classes, or years (see chapter VI, section 3.1).

With the commercialisation of agriculture, the differentiation of farmers gave way to a class of rich farmers (Le Mons Walker 2008; Mohanty 2005; Pandit 1979). These rich farmers have the highest levels of ownership of means of production, while the poor farmers have hardly any or only very small plots of land and often labour in and out at the same time. This inequality in villages is only increasing. To take a Vidarbha village as an example, survey data shows that the top 5% of the village population owns 35% of wealth, while the bottom 50% own 10% (Ramachandran 2011). Nair and Banerjee (2012) have examined land distribution and found that it became more unequal between 1960 and 2002 and that particularly medium farmers were increasingly at risk of losing their land.

Ramachandran (2011) pointed out that several macro indicators should be analysed with regard to their different implications for different classes of farmers. Then, it would become obvious that agricultural development has been skewed towards the richer farmers. One indicator is that of electricity consumption in agriculture. Overall consumption rose since the New Economic Policies. Given that ownership of motor pumps in villages is skewed towards big landholders, it is mostly the rich that benefited.

Another such indicator is the consumption of chemical fertilisers, which increased markedly but had very different implications on different groups of farmers. In order to

[27] Following Byres (2004), it is more accurate to talk about capitalist or rich farmers instead of big landholders. The reason is that it was the former that would get the advantages of today's neo-liberal policies rather than the latter.

sustain soil quality, it is necessary to stabilize the consumption of urea, phosphate and potash at a balance of about 4:2:1, with slight changes depending on soil type. In 1992, fertiliser prices were partially liberalized: the prices of phosphate and potash were decontrolled while urea remained under government control. This led to increases in the prices of potash and phosphate, while urea prices were still moderate. Despite efforts of the government to restore price parity, these different prices persisted. Through the period of the Green Revolution, this ratio was slowly but steadily approaching the balance of 4:2:1, but deteriorated quickly after 1992: nitrogenous fertilisers increased rapidly and phosphate as well as potash fertilisers fell relatively (Ramakumar 2014). Usually the rich farmers can afford to diversify their fertilizer mixture, while the poor rely solely on urea. This overuse of urea leads to a declining fertiliser response as well as a depletion of micronutrients from the soil – and eventually to a deterioration of soil fertility, affecting the lands of the poor. After 2009, this effect might even have accelerated because the prices of fertilizers skyrocketed – particularly those of phosphorus and potash fertilizers (Ramakumar 2014).

Parthasarthy (2015) argued that there should be more studies on the relationship between the upwardly mobile farmers and developments in the agrarian sector. The rich farmers, he says, play a role in the processes of marketization and commodification. They have a tendency to seek rents and profits as ways of protecting their interest. By their constant lobbying for subsidies for export-oriented agriculture as well as for agro-processing industries together with their refusal to develop the skills base of labour and their opposition to food security, "*sections of the peasantry [the rich farmers, provincial elite] have a role in facilitating neo-liberal policies resulting in the marginalization of the peasantry [poorer farmers] and contributing to agrarian distress*" (ibid, 822).

These analyses of Ramachandran, Ramakumar and Parthasarthy show that it is misleading to talk about agriculture in crisis *in toto*. Rather, it is important to distinguish between different groups of farmers. One way of doing so is according to the size of landholdings.

3.4 Landholdings in Rural India

Land, the most important means of production still defines the different classes of agricultural households. The rich farmers generally own the most and best land in the villages. Their members are not involved in agricultural operations on the land. Rather, the land is leased out to tenants. The rich farmers may be from traditionally dominant rural castes as well as from OBCs. In any case, they are "*entrenched in positions of social and political dominance*" (Ramachandran 2011, 59). The medium, semi-medium and small farmers stand between the rich capitalist farmers and the landless workers and marginal farmers (for the definitions see section 2.1, this chapter). They do most of the operations on their land themselves, while they are also subjugated to the markets.

Land is still the foundation of power, even if other businesses like money lending, agro-processing industries, dairy, trade, petrol pumps, sale and leasing of agricultural machinery or inputs are important sources of income and power as well. But these

businesses too are concentrated in the hands of the rich farmers. It is often the (former) landlords that seek access to the institutions of state power, on a local level the *panchayati raj* institutions[28]. This allows them to be the first to seize the opportunities of higher education or modern sector employment, which in turn further increases inequality (Ramachandran 2011).

The 2010–11 agricultural census shows that the number of small and marginal farms is increasing. **Table 3** depicts the percentages of marginal and small landholdings as a percentage of total landholdings and how it has developed from the 1980s to today. The percentage of small and marginal farmers has grown and constitutes now more than 80% of all landholdings. **Table 4** shows the same trend as a percentage of the total area under cultivation, where the area cultivated by small and marginal farmers increased from 16% to 53%. While this development can be seen all over India, this marginalization is most pronounced in Karnataka, Maharashtra, Madhya Pradesh and Tamil Nadu. Furthermore, the area per holding has been decreasing (Deshpande and Arora 2010).

One of the main reasons for this development is that over time, the rural population has increased tremendously. In 1951, the rural population of India was 298.6 million; in 2001 it reached 742.6 million. This means that in five decades the rural population increased by 444 million people. In this period, the number of cultivators has doubled, while the number of agricultural labourers has quadrupled. In contrast, the net area sown[29] has increased only from about 119 million ha in 1951 to about 141 million ha in 2001; the gross cropped area increased in the same period from about 132 million ha to 186 million ha. This has put immense pressure on land resources: the net area sown per cultivator had declined from 1.70 ha in 1951 to just 1.11 ha in 2001 and from 4.35 ha to 1.32 ha per worker in the same period. Apart from the small landholding size, the number of parcels in each landholding is also increasing: there are an estimated 2.7 parcels in each of the small and marginal holdings due to on-going fragmentation (Sidhu 2010). This fragmentation of land is a consequence of the law of inheritance of ancestral property, the absence of a progressive tax on inherited land, and scarce non-farm employment (Niroula and Thapa 2005).

[28] Maharashtra has a three–tier system. The *panchayati raj* institutions are the basis of local governance: the *gram panchayat* at the village level, the *panchayat samiti* one level higher at the development block, and *zilla parishad* at the district level and on the highest level the state's government. In Maharashtra, the *zilla parishad* is the most powerful of the three. It is composed of directly elected councillors (numbering 50–75) as well as the chairpersons of the *panchayat samiti*. Its tasks are to prepare, review and monitor a Five–Year Plan for the district (GoI 2007). Those Five-Year Plans are based on a vision from the district and the development plans from the *gram panchayats* and *panchayat samitis* (Sridharan 2006).

[29] The net area sown is the total area under crop cultivation. In contrary to the gross cropped area, the number of crops grown on the land per year does change the net sown area.

Land is inherited, owned and operated predominantly by men. The legal discrimination against women's ownership rights to agricultural land has decreased[30] or even disappeared. But many social norms continue to be barriers for women's ownership of land. One example is that dowry is seen as the woman's legitimate share of ancestral property and therefore land is given to the sons rather than daughters. In some cases, women have a desire to own land, but they do not want to demand their share in land because they do not want to risk a fight with their family members. As a result, women are still strongly discriminated against and only a minority of women inherits or owns land (Agarwal 1994, Kulkarni et al. 2008, Landesa 2013).

Table 3: Percentage of landholdings (in % of total landholdings) in India (based on GoI 2012)

	1980–81	**1990–91**	**2000–01**	**2010–11**
Large	2.4%	1.6%	1.0%	0.7%
Medium	9.1%	7.1%	5.5%	4.3%
Semi-medium	14.0%	13.1%	11.7%	10.0%
Small	18.1%	18.8%	18.9%	17.9%
Marginal	56.4%	59.4%	62.9%	67.0%

Table 4: Percentage of area operated under marginal and small holdings (in % of total operated area) in India (based on GoI 2012)

	1980–81	**1990–91**	**2000–01**	**2010–11**
Large	23.0%	17.3%	13.2%	10.9%
Medium	29.6%	27.0%	24.0%	21.2%
Semi-medium	21.2%	23.2%	24.0%	23.6%
Small	14.1%	17.4%	20.2%	22.1%
Marginal	12.0%	15.0%	18.7%	22.2%
Average landholding per household	4.5 acres	3.8 acres	3.3 acres	2.9 acres

Together, these trends show that the number of landholdings that are too small to provide sufficient income is increasing. Reddy and Mishra (2010b) argue that those households are only viable if they can earn at least 50% of their livelihood outside agriculture. While small farms are not necessarily inefficient, there are several structural factors that do work against small and marginal farmers. One of these factors is that small and marginal farmers struggle to buy high-quality inputs such as high-

[30] The Hindu Succession Act 1956 covers inheritance and succession of property of Hindus, Sikhs, Buddhists, and Jains (a large majority of the Indian population). The Act was amended in 2005 to grant rights to women to inherit agricultural land of the parents and husband. After nearly a decade, Maharashtra together with four other southern states (Kerala, Andhra Pradesh, Karnataka and Tamil Nadu) had amended their succession laws to allow women to inherit agricultural land. For more information on the land rights of women of other groups, see Kulkarni et al. (2008).

yielding variety seeds. Another factor is that small and marginal farmers have much higher transaction costs and low bargaining power in the local markets (see e.g. Reddy and Mishra 2010b). Additionally, most farmers do not have any storage opportunities, are in urgent need of money or the trader is their moneylender at the same time. Therefore, they have to sell their produce immediately and cannot wait for the price to increase (Parasuraman and Rajaretnam 2011). Consequently, they end up paying more for their inputs and achieve lower prices for their yields.

I will come back to these aspects in the next chapter, with particular focus on Maharashtra and Vidarbha. Based on the information and arguments so far in this chapter, I now would like to reflect on the nature of what is called the "agrarian crisis".

4 Concluding Thoughts: What Kind of Crisis?

It becomes clear in this chapter that the situation is difficult for the masses of the Indian peasantry – a situation often labelled as the "agrarian crisis". However, it might be misleading to name the complex, overlaying causes and symptoms uniformly as an 'agrarian crisis'. Reddy and Mishra (2010b) argue that it is necessary to distinguish

> *"between the two faces of the crisis, namely, the 'agrarian crisis' and the 'agricultural crisis'. (…) 'Agricultural crisis' refers to performance of the agricultural sector in terms of changes in growth of productivity and production and the underlying factors. 'Agrarian crisis' is structural and institutional in nature, as could be seen in growing marginalization and failure of support systems, especially as a part of the reforms agenda because of the shift in institutional emphasis from state to market". (ibid, 43)*

This distinction partly mirrors the different lines of arguments outlined above. It is crucial to differentiate between these two crises, because their underlying factors and structures as well as their consequences for different groups of farmers might be very different. Bearing in mind the many crises this 'agrarian crisis' encompasses, during the course of my qualitative research I was faced with the scenario of most interviewees using the expression "agrarian crisis" rather unspecifically or uncritically to refer to both crises. Because this research is concerned with the way activists and farmers talk about the situation of farmers, I have adopted this terminology as well.

That aside, I see the agrarian crisis as a major problem. The withdrawal of the state from agriculture since the 1990s in many areas has worsened the situation for the large sections of the peasantry. In a situation of high price volatility and low profitability for small and medium farmers, support from the state in the form of of price support or credit would be urgently needed. I therefore find it important to talk about an agrarian crisis to emphasize the *structural nature* thereof. The respective policies and developments affect the poorer sections of the peasantry adversely, and at the same time help the rural elite to accumulate more land and wealth. I emphasise the unequal consequences of the agrarian crisis because the popular conception of the crisis avoids the multitude of social and economic factors that mediate the effects of the crisis on the

larger category identified as 'peasantry'. In fact, the varied perceptions and visions of the agrarian crisis form a very significant part of the present thesis.

Last but not least, I understand that caste and gender are very important categories to understand rural life and everyday struggles of the peasantry. I will come back to these two categories repeatedly in the course of this study. Nevertheless, the study is focused on mobilisations, which unfortunately are mostly the domain of men from high and middle caste groups.

As mentioned above, various regions are affected very differently by the agrarian crisis. For this thesis, I have chosen a 'movement' active in Vidarbha. Vidarbha's rural areas are less developed than other regions in Maharashtra and are known to feature a disproportionally high number of farmer suicides. In the next chapter, therefore, I will introduce Vidarbha and its agriculture.

III. Vidarbha: a Region in Distress?

Despite being located in the geographical centre of India, Vidarbha is a marginal region in many respects. Within the relatively advanced state of Maharashtra, Vidarbha lags behind in terms of agricultural development and is often referred to as one of the regions where a very high number of farmers commit suicides. Living in a backward region is important to how farmers understand their situation. Therefore, this chapter III is dedicated to Vidarbha, the region where my research is located. After introducing Vidarbha, I will depict how the agrarian crisis manifests itself in that region. I will refer to secondary literature and statistics as well as interviews with farmers and 'movement' actors.

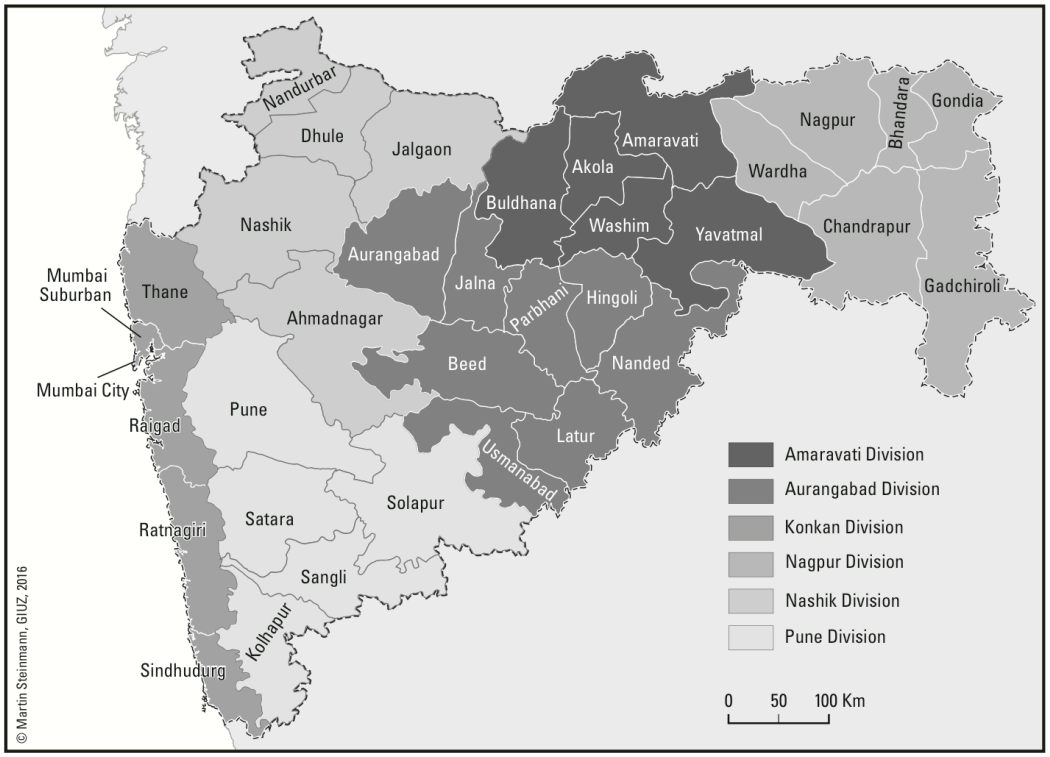
1 Vidarbha in Context

Vidarbha is a region located in the very east of the State of Maharashtra. Maharashtra has several administrative levels: the highest unit is the state, followed by the division, then the district, the development block and finally the village. For issues of planning, development and administration, Maharashtra is often split into three regions: Vidarbha (Amravati and Nagpur division), Marathwada (Aurangabad division), Rest of Maharashtra (Konkan, Nashik and Pune divisions) and Mumbai (GoM 2013b). For this thesis, I take the level of the region (Vidarbha) as the main reference because Vidarbha is important for interviewees to describe where they live and belong to.

Vidarbha has an area of about 97,000 km^2 (31.7% of Maharashtra's area)[31] and a rural population of roughly 23 million in 2011 (23% of Maharashtra's population) living in nearly 14,000 villages. (GoM 2013b; Parasuraman and Rajaretnam 2011). The eastern and western parts of Vidarbha differ considerably. The eastern part has large forest coverage and grows mainly rice, while the western part belongs to the cotton belt of India. The focus of this study is on three western districts: Wardha, Yavatmal and Buldhana.

[31] To compare, Switzerland has an area of roughly 41,000 km^2.

Figure 2: The six different political divisions of Maharashtra. The divisions of Amravati (or Amaravati) and Nagpur constitute the region of Vidarbha.



To explain why Vidarbha can be considered a marginal region and to understand the inequalities between the different regions of Maharashtra, I start with a history first of Vidarbha and then of Maharashtra. I then explore the importance of cotton to the region's development before analysing the socio-economic dominance of the *Maratha-Kunbi* caste-complex. Lastly, I discuss the situation of landholdings in Vidarbha.

1.1 Regional Inequality: Vidarbha in Maharashtra

Vidarbha as it is presently configured became an administrative region only recently. In the beginning of the 19th century, the region called *Berar* (roughly Amravati division) belonged to the *Maratha* kingdom and was later transferred to the *Nizam*[32] of Hyderabad, while *Nagvidarbha* (roughly Nagpur division) belonged to the *Bhonsala* kingdom. The *Nizam* had an agreement with the *Bhonsala* king to share the revenues of the *Berar* region. In 1853, he leased out the *Berar* region to the British East India Company, which cancelled the agreement with the *Bhonsalas*. Upset over the Company's cancellation, the *Bhonsalas* participated in the First War of Independence against the British (or the Rebellion of 1857), lost and, consequently, the *Nagvidarbha* districts were annexed by the British Central Province and from then on, ruled by a Resident appointed by the British. Around 1900, the British also officially annexed the *Berar* districts and added them to the Central Province. After the formation of the State of

[32] The title of the hereditary ruler of Hyderabad.

Maharashtra in 1956, the whole of Vidarbha became part of the state[33] (Phansalkar 2005).

The negotiations around the creation of the State of Maharashtra after 1956 became a basis for discussing and addressing regional inequality within the new state. Since then, Vidarbha was brought under the protection of Article 371(2) of the Constitution of India. This article gives special responsibilities to the states of Maharashtra and Gujarat to provide sufficient resources to less developed regions. In the case of Maharashtra, many resolutions in this direction have been adopted by both houses of the state's parliament. To name an example, the winter session of the legislative assembly[34] of Maharashtra was shifted from Mumbai (the capital of the state) to Nagpur, the capital of the Nagpur division. However, much like this example, other attempts to foster the marginalized region have been limited to merely symbolic gestures. Instead of more substantial measures, the elites have tried to undermine the issues of regional inequality (Phansalkar 2005). This is very well illustrated by a quote by then Chief Minister V. P. Naik, a big landholder from Vidarbha. He said in 1969 that

> *"we should now reject the view that a certain district or a certain region is underdeveloped and hence should be given additional assistance. Instead we should direct our efforts to secure a balanced development of all the regions of the state, the whole of which is more or less underdeveloped" (Mohanty 2009, 66).*

In the 1980s, there was a renewed interest in regional inequalities and the government appointed a Fact Finding Committee that indicated a huge developmental backlog in Vidarbha, Marathwada and Konkan (Mohanty 2009). In 1994 again, three regional development boards were established in Maharashtra in order to remove regional disparities in the above-mentioned divisions. A committee was established, reviewed the development indicators anew and found that between 1984 and 1994, regional disparities had further widened (GoI 2006, 2007; Lalvani 2009). In 2013, the latest report on balanced regional development analysed the differences between the three regions of Maharashtra: Vidarbha, Marathwada and Rest of Maharashtra. The authors found that during the 1990s, the disparities between Vidarbha and Marathwada compared to the Rest of Maharashtra decreased but again increased during the 2000s (GoM 2013b, 2). The backlog of Vidarbha compared to the Rest of Maharashtra comes out clear (see below). But also within Vidarbha itself there are big differences. Nagpur is relatively well–off, Buldhana and Wardha are much worse but still much better than Yavatmal (GoI 2007; GoM 2013b).

The state government began to allocate special outlays for these regions from 1985 onwards. But in the non–backlog schemes[35], the distribution of funds continued to be

[33] Vidarbha belonged to the state of Madya Pradesh earlier.

[34] The Maharashtra Legislative Assembly (often called assembly) is the lower house of the bicameral legislature of the state and is directly elected from single–seat constituencies.

[35] These are the funds that were not directed particularly towards regions with a so-called development backlog, e.g. Vidarbha.

uneven (Mohanty 2009). Today, the distinction between backlog and non–backlog funds has been abolished. All funds are subjected to a formula that considers the size of the backlog, the population size, the net sown area and on–going projects. The implementation – the actual expenditure against the allocation – is a different issue. Previous track records showed a lack of effective monitoring, implementation systems and political will (GoI 2006; see particularly GoM 2013b, for a detailed overview over reports, policies and the distribution of resources). Recently, a fact–finding commission once again examined the reasons for Vidarbha's poor development (for more details see section 2, later in this chapter).

Table 5 below shows selected developmental indicators for Vidarbha, Marathwada and the Rest of Maharashtra (GoM 2013b). The table clearly shows the differences between Vidarbha and Marathwada on the one hand and the Rest of Maharashtra on the other.

Table 5: Major development indicators for Maharashtra's regions Vidarbha, Marathwada and Rest of Maharashtra (GoM 2013b, based on data of 2010).

	Vidarbha	**Marathwada**	**Rest of M.**
Human development index	0.720	0.691	0.770
Infant mortality rate	39.5	35.0	28.8
Under-five mortality rate	53	46	34
Malnutrition	12.9%	8.6%	11.6%

1.2 Cotton: The Diminishing Value of White Gold

The story of Vidarbha cannot be told without narrating the story of cotton, a crop of immense significance for the Western districts of Vidarbha. Under colonial rule, the total cultivated area witnessed an increase, as the British were keen on growing commercial crops, particularly cotton. The demand for cotton in Bombay for export to England was high. This demand became even higher during the American Civil War when America did not export cotton to England, causing the "Cotton Famine" in England. Consequently, the British demand for Indian raw cotton increased and so did the area in Maharashtra under cotton cultivation. Despite the end of the American Civil War, this trend continued and finally led to the opening of the Nagpur branch of the Great Indian Peninsula Railway in 1866. Through this facilitated transportation, production was again expanded; at the end of the 19th century, one third of the cultivated land of *Berar* (today roughly Amravati division) was under mostly rain-fed cotton cultivation (Mohanty 2005).

Cotton production was profitable yet vulnerable since it was mostly dependent on monsoon rains. In the *Berar* districts with a high area under cotton cultivation, famines occurred often and affected many small and marginal farmers and labourers. Nevertheless, cultivators from the communities of *Maratha–Kunbis*, *Rajputs* or *Telis* who

were mostly large and medium farmers and had surplus of food grains did well (Mohanty 2005). Most farmers did not have resources to make the necessary investments to produce high quality cotton and hence could not realize high prices. Furthermore, traders did not pay proper prices and took away the surplus because typically farmers were in urgent need of money at the time of sale. In these conditions, the lower peasantry underwent a process of de-peasantisation and fell into petty tenancy and labour (Bharadwaj 1985; Patnaik 1999).

The following quote from an interview with a farmer provides a historical glimpse into how cotton has shaped agriculture and rural society in Vidarbha. One of the interviewees reminisced that:

> *"before 1980, 1990, kisans felt that the cotton price and price of gold were equal. If they sold one quintal of cotton to the market, they brought 10g gold back to the house. Now the price of gold has increased very much. Then why the price of cotton has not increased in the last 20 years? (…) Cotton was the gold of Vidarbha. But now no prices. It is no gold anymore."*

Talking about the role that cotton played in the development of Vidarbha and about the inequalities between regions makes sense only when juxtaposing cotton to other crops in other regions. While in Vidarbha, cotton continues to be a very important crop, Western Maharashtra has shifted to sugarcane. In the recent period, large parts of Western Maharashtra went into horticulture where the income per acre is significantly higher. This is one of the reasons why Western Maharashtra developed faster than other regions (Jadhav 2006).

1.3 Caste, Class and Sugar: the *Maratha-Kunbis*

Western Maharashtra's shift to export oriented, profitable cash crops in recent times is not by sheer coincidence. It can be understood through a closer investigation of the class and caste basis of agrarian changes and distribution of public resources in the State of Maharashtra, particularly when one examines the power of the *Maratha-Kunbis* of Western Maharashtra. Technically, the *Maratha-Kunbis* do not constitute a caste either in the ritualistic or historical sense. The *Marathas* claim to be *Kshatriyas* –a *varna* category of the Hindu caste system, while *Kunbis* are mostly cultivators (Menon 2009). But the *Maratha-Kunbi* nexus existed and continued to flourish. A certain section of *Marathas* were recognised by larger society as *Kshatriyas* owing to their self-identity as a martial caste associated with Shivaji Maharaj, a famous Maharashtrian leader. But, historically, the *Maratha* army had a lot of peasant representation, many of whom came from the *Kunbi* caste (see Habib 1983). In the present day, the two castes are both mostly (landed) farmers who intermingle freely with each other in terms of kinship and socio-cultural exchange and derive patronage from state and political institutions. Caste solidarity along with the possibilities of social mobility has given rise to the category of *Maratha-Kunbis* (Menon 2009 in *The Hindu*).

The power of the *Maratha-Kunbis* developed differently in Western Maharashtra and Vidarbha. In Western Maharashtra, two dominant classes emerged after independence

and became closely interlinked. The first group was the educated urban middle class – often of higher castes such as *Brahmins* – that belonged to government services and business elites. This group had close linkages with the rural areas because many had migrated to urban and industrial centres, when the position of rural *Brahmins* weakened. In the urban areas, they gained control of public and private sector industries, bureaucracy, educational institutions and the Indian National Congress (henceforth: Congress) (Rodrigues 1998). The second group was the commercial peasantry, the rich farmers, who were mostly *Marathas* and *Kunbis*. They became increasingly powerful in the countryside and the *Brahmins* aimed to ally with these *Maratha–Kunbi* elites. Together, these two groups established agricultural sugar co-operatives[36] in Western Maharashtra and controlled the sugar factories (Attwood 1992).

Using this alliance, the *Maratha-Kunbis* of Western Maharashtra started to dominate power politics in the state, particularly in the realm of agriculture. By taking control of these sugar co-operatives as well as the newly created democratic institutions (the *panchayati raj* bodies) and by making use of caste and kinship relations, they could increase and consolidate their power (Attwood 1992; Dahiwale 1995; Mohanty 2009). Through the patronage of state power, they gained and sustained access to new technologies and strategies for production (Sirsikar 1995). This modernization of agriculture was in the interest of both the rich farmers as well as the industrial bourgeoisie of Bombay. It provided the latter with markets in close proximity, allowed them to establish agro–processing industries and provided them with labour force for Bombay's industries (Sirsikar 1995). In this fashion, rural and urban elite helped each other to protect their mutual interests. The *Maratha-Kunbis,* together with their allies, created and realized their own ideology of agrarian development, an ideology of globalization of agriculture with a focus on export–oriented cash crops.

Consequently, Western Maharashtra's agriculture (and sugarcane in particular) was and still is dominated by the *Maratha-Kunbi* caste-complex and they have become a powerful force in the entire state of Maharashtra. But unlike in Western Maharashtra, the *Maratha–Kunbis* could not dominate society and politics in Vidarbha or Marathwada[37] to such an extent (Phansalkar 2005). Generally speaking, the reason is that the internal cohesion and relative power of economic and political elites of Marathwada and Vidarbha were much more fragmented (see also Parthasarthy 2015, 820-821). This weakened the position of Vidarbha's rich farmers to negotiate the distribution of public resources and the direction of the state's agricultural policies.

[36] Sugar co-operatives were established after independence. The sugar mills belong to the co-operative, which is made up of the supplying farmers. The sugar co-operatives have become an important source of power in Western Maharashtra. (Lalvani 2008)

[37]Marathwada experienced little democracy and capitalist modernisation along with British rule and remained in a rigid framework of communities based on castes and religion. The urban, industrial elites in Hyderabad had little roots in the region (Mohanty 2009). Still, Marathwada performs much worse in the major developmental indicators, often even worse than Vidarbha (GoM 2013b).

There are three main reasons for this fragmentation in Vidarbha (Mohanty 2009). First, the *Maratha-Kunbis* themselves were fragmented in terms of classes: Some were rich cotton cultivators/traders while others were small cultivators or even manual labourers. The conflicting interests between these classes within the *Maratha-Kunbis* have created disunity among *Maratha–Kunbis*. The second reason is that there were other powerful groups. On the one hand the *Marwaris* and *Komtis*, both belonging to the Hindi-speaking areas of Madhya Pradesh, were the moneylender-cum-traders in the region with a lot of power in the regional economy (see also Phansalkar 2005). This led to animosity between these groups and the Marathi speaking *Maratha-Kunbis,* which only weakened the latter group. Also, the tiny business and industrial class that emerged in Nagpur because of textile and other associated concerns came from non-*Marathi* communities, had little interest in agriculture and therefore few linkages with the *Maratha-Kunbis* of rural Vidarbha. The nexus of urban bourgeoisie and rich peasantry that developed in Western Maharashtra did not exist much in Vidarbha. Third, the *Marathas* are less numerous and there are more Scheduled Tribe and OBC groups (Deshpande 2006; Palshikar 2004). Fourth, the tensions between Scheduled Castes (and later Buddhists) and higher castes were particularly strong in Vidarbha because of Ambedkar's social–political movement (Mohanty 2009). All this leads to the dominant reality of contemporary Maharashtra: Western Maharashtra elites drive the state structure and policies and this region has historically been able to corner a lot of resources from the state to develop faster than other regions of Maharashtra (Baviskar 2013; Tambe 2004).

In the last few sections, I analysed the disadvantaged position of Vidarbha within Maharashtra. But inequality is quite high within the region of Vidarbha. To understand this inequality, I take the landholding pattern as an exemplar, which has its roots in pre-colonial and colonial land tenure systems.

1.4 Inequality: Landholding in Vidarbha

In the mid 19th century, the whole region of Vidarbha came under the *Ryotvari* system of landholding.[38] In the *Ryotvari* land tenure system, property rights are vested in the cultivators and the land revenue was collected directly by the government, eliminating middlemen with hereditary positions such as the *zamindars* (Omvedt 1973a). The colonial state reduced the land revenue demand initially, but then increased it significantly, creating an elaborate bureaucratic network to ensure revenue collection. The colonial authorities later delegated the administrative task of tax collection to the

[38] In most of the *Berar* areas, the *ryotvari* system was present since an earlier period. The second system present in the old Central Province areas was the *malguzari* system. A *malguzar* was allotted some villages, where he collected land revenues. A *malguzar* could be described as a middleman, somewhere between a collection agent and a *zamindar*. He had, though, absolute right over all village land except the plots owned by farmers. Further, the *malguzar* rights were transferable. So even though he was a petty landlord, he had the same absolute power as the *zamindars.* (Strictly speaking, there have been three systems. But the *ijardari* system that was similar to a *zamindari* system (*ijardars* were permanent landlords with dependent tenantry) was only present in some *kolam* regions.) (Phansalkar 2005)

upper castes. These positions were prestigious ones and were mostly occupied by *Maratha* and *Kunbi* farmers. Besides the position of a tax collector, they received plots of land and rights over the village commons (Dutt 1904; Mohanty 2005, 2009; Phansalkar 2005).

The particularity of the *Ryotvari* system was that the tenants were legally entitled to occupy land permanently and dispose of it freely, which had severe consequences. Vidarbha is a dry land area and there have been many crop failure periods. Consequently, many low caste farmers and landless labourers were forced to borrow money from large landholders, cotton and grain dealers, mostly belonging to *Brahmin* and merchant communities. Many farmers became indebted and had to sell their lands; a significant proportion of them eventually migrated to Bombay, Nagpur and other cities for employment in cotton mills, docks, or railways (Borpujari 1973; Mohanty 2005). The ones who stayed on their plots were no longer owner-cultivators but de facto tenants. Therefore, the Maharashtrian *Ryotvari* regions had fewer owner-cultivators than other regions of India with similar tenurial systems in the early 20th century (Omvedt 1973a). The *Kunbis* accumulated a large part of agricultural holdings during that period. They often cultivated the land by leasing it out mostly to lower caste cultivators, leaving the ones at the bottom of the rural hierarchy – the Scheduled Caste communities – to be agricultural labourers. If they had access to any land, it was of poor quality (Brahme and Upadhyaya 1979; Satya 1997).

In terms of landholdings in Maharashtra, there is a close connection between caste and size of ownership holdings. According to Arora (2001), big landowners (more than 8 acres) are mostly *Maratha–Kunbis,* Nomadic Tribes (NT) or a few *Brahmins* and OBCs. Middle farmers (2–8 acres) are also mostly *Maratha–Kunbis, Telis* or other middle caste communities, some belong to artisan castes, a few *Dalits*, OBCs and *Adivasis*. The class of small farmers (less than 2 acres) and the landless is constituted mainly by *Dalits*, OBCs, *Adivasis* and a few *Maratha–Kunbis*. The category of small farmers and landless is the most heterogeneous one because it serves as a last resort for farmers who have lost their basis of livelihood (Kumar 2004; Mohanty 2005; Phansalkar 2005; Parasuraman and Rajaretnam 2011; Ramachandran 2011). Furthermore, the population belonging to the categories of Scheduled Tribes in Maharashtra still operates mostly on marginal, sloping land (GoM 2013b; Rajasekaran 2004).

In 1958, an act in Maharashtra ordained that leased land needs to be transferred into the ownership of the tenant; and in 1961, Maharashtra installed land ceilings that defined an upper limit to the amount of landownership (Mohanty 2005). Despite many loopholes and the process being thwarted by many forces, there was some positive impact on redistribution of land in Maharashtra and also Vidarbha. Maharashtra in particular has a slightly better track record than most other states. In 1995, 11% of the total land was redistributed. The Gini coefficient of land distribution in Maharashtra slightly decreased from 0.528 in 1970 to 0.481 in 1990 (Mohanty 2001; Rajasekaran 1998, 2004). This indicates an improvement, however modest, one that does not

contradict the conclusion that the land reforms in India were a major failure (see section 1.4, chapter II; section 3.2, chapter VI).

In the rural areas of Maharashtra, the importance of agricultural incomes has not declined compared to non-agricultural incomes. This can have many causes. It is, for example, possible that the urban centres attract particularly the non-agricultural labour away from agriculture (Jha 2006, 20). In contemporary Vidarbha, 67% of the workforce depends on agriculture. 25% own land, while 42% are agricultural workers (based on GoM 2013b, 87). Among the landowners, around 30% are marginal farmers with less then 2.5 acres of cultivated landholding, 35% are small farmers with 2.6–5 acres of land, 30% are middle farmers with 5.1–25 acres and 5% have more than 25 acres. These numbers differ among different districts. Buldhana has an exceptionally high percentage of landed farmers (more than 70%), but also a significant share of marginal farmers. About 60% of farmers in Wardha and Yavatmal hold some amount of land but a significant share consists of small and marginal farmers. Wardha has a high percentage of farmers with irrigated land – around one fourth – while Yavatmal and Buldhana only have around 15% (Parasuraman and Rajaretnam 2011). In whole Vidarbha, the fragmentation of landholdings is an on-going process. The share of farmers owning less then 5 acres of land is increasing annually by 15% (GoM 2013b, 267; see also section 3.4 in chapter II).

When looking at landholding, the caste structure of ownership is extremely important. There are four major categories in Vidarbha's rural areas. The first are people belonging to the categories of Scheduled Tribes or Nomadic and De-Notified Tribes, namely the *Gonds, Kolams, Pradans* or *Korkus*. The *Banjara* also fall under this category, although they are more developed and settled all over the Deccan plateau and Western Vidarbha. Together, they constitute nearly one fourth of the rural population. The second category is the Scheduled Castes (around one fifth of the population), among which *Mahars*[39] are the largest group. Scheduled Tribes and Scheduled Castes are mainly small or marginal farmers or agricultural labour. Scheduled Tribes often live close to forests and make use of its resources and are at the bottom in terms of many development indicators. The third category consists of *Marathi* speaking people within the *Maratha–Kunbi* caste complex together with *Telis* as another major group. *Maratha–Kunbis* are numerically strongest and the main castes of farmers and landholders. They are the ruling caste in Western Vidarbha, while *Telis* are numerically superior in Eastern districts and *Brahmins* mostly in urban centres. The fourth category consists of relatively recent migrants from Gujarat and other states, mainly the *Marwaris* (Mohanty 2005; Phansalkar 2005; Parasuraman and Rajaretnam 2011).

Last but not least, the landholding patterns are evolving with the rise in land prices and development of a land market. According to Deshpande and Arora (2010), the land market is skewed in favour of large owners. Small and marginal farmers – particularly

[39] Many *Mahars* in Vidarbha (as opposed to other regions in Maharashtra) were landholders (Kumar 2004).

those from low castes – have often lost land. If the situation is particularly difficult for small and marginal farmers, large owners or actors from the corporate sector offer high land prices to induce farmers sell their land. The Census of Maharashtra shows that many small and marginal farmers sell their land and join the army of the landless (see section 3.4, chapter II). Furthermore, Deshpande and Arora argue that because of the restrictions on tenancy, an undercover tenancy market has emerged which is highly exploitative. As an important consequence, these tenants are then not entitled to state-led schemes such as loan waivers.

2 Agriculture in Vidarbha

Since 1999, the growth of agriculture and the productivity in Vidarbha is remarkably lower when compared to other regions. The rate of agricultural growth has been statistically zero for the period of 2000-2011, often even negative. Additionally, the fluctuations of the year on year growth rates are exceptionally high in Vidarbha (GoM 2013b, 93).

2.1 Prices and Costs

Earlier, the government used to make most of the procurement operations for agricultural products, but in the 1990s this market was liberalized (GoI 2006, see chapter II). Before the these new policies in the 1990s, agencies of the state government in Maharashtra, namely the Maharashtra State Co–operative Marketing Federation and the Maharashtra State Co–operative Tribal Development Corporation[40] carried out the procurement on behalf of the Government of India (GoM 2013a).

For cotton, Maharashtra has a particular history with the scheme of Monopoly Procurement of Cotton under Maharashtra Raw Cotton Act in 1971. This Act puts the marketing of cotton under complete state control, not allowing the farmers to sell cotton to anyone but the Maharashtra State Co–operative Cotton Growers Marketing Federation Limited (MSCCGMF, part of the Maharashtra State Co–operative Marketing Federation). During this time of state monopoly, the farmers were paid fixed prices that did not change during one season. Aside from eliminating the middlemen, the act sought to stabilize incomes and production and therefore to create a steady supply of quality cotton. This monopoly ended in 2004 after heated debates in the parliament.

Outside Maharashtra, the cotton trade has been routed through the Cotton Corporation of India since 1970. In 1994, cotton lint came under Open General Licence[41] and so did raw cotton in 2001. This meant that cotton could be freely imported or exported. However, the Government of India still has the right to ban exports or to define export quotas, if it finds the deficit in supply to be too high. Normally, though, the cotton price

[40] The Maharashtra State Co–op Tribal Development Corporation is responsible for the so-called tribal areas.

[41] Open General Licence means that the product can be freely traded as per rules of the World Trade Organization.

follows the international cotton price, as long as it does not fall below the MSP. In that case, the Government of India will guarantee procurement at the MSP rate. In Maharashtra, the MSCCGMF had often paid a price higher than the MSP to the cultivators and in this process MSCCGMF experienced huge losses. Consequently, after 2000 it gradually gave up its monopoly character and only paid the MSP (Godbole 1999; Shroff 2006).

It is not only the prices but also the costs of production that determine the profitability of agriculture. The costs of production have increased tremendously with the Green Revolution technologies. High Yielding Varieties (HYV) seeds have replaced local varieties. Chemical fertilizers are used more often and have increased in importance over farm manure and other kinds of local fertilizers. If these inputs are of high quality and appropriate to local conditions, if they are used with knowledge and extension, if the soils are fertile, irrigation is secured and no major catastrophe (such as a flood) harms the crops, these technologies have the potential to increase the yield. If one of these conditions is not fulfilled, the costs of production threaten to overrun the MSP (GoI 2006; Pant 2012, 63).

In agricultural input markets in rural and semi-urban Maharashtra, many dealers offer seeds, fertilizer and pesticides. The seeds are often found spurious (GoI 2006). There is a lack of a well–known, government-approved seal of quality to assure the quality of seeds and other inputs. Dealers promise that with HYV seeds, the protection from the cotton bollworm is improved and fewer pesticides are needed. In this way, the higher costs of seeds is offset by the lower cost of pesticides and higher yields. In case of spurious seeds, farmers who buy hybrid or Bt cotton[42] seeds have to nevertheless invest in pesticides. The government is certainly aware of the problem but there is no proper certification system yet in place. Further, most of the HYV are not adjusted to rain–fed conditions and do not render yields under these conditions. Because high quality seeds are very expensive, farmers often mix seeds of different qualities. This, however, results in bad quality and low yield. In this way, we can infer that the price realization in agriculture with HYV and Bt cotton is far from satisfactory (GoI 2006).

These two main factors, low and volatile prices as well as high input costs and risks, can lead to yield or price-related shocks. Many cotton farmers live below the poverty line despite their *relatively* big land holdings (GoI 2006).

2.2 Irrigation

One of the most crucial inputs in dry land areas is water for irrigation. About 80% of Maharashtra's agriculture is rain–fed. In the area cultivated under cotton, only 4% is irrigated (Deshpande and Arora 2010). Cotton is a cash crop and without irrigation, crop failures are common and yields are low. Even if the irrigated area in Maharashtra is

[42] Bt cotton refers to genetically modified cotton varieties that produce insecticides against the cotton bollworm. The insecticides are Bt toxins and are originally produced by the bacterium *Bacillus thuringiensis*.

slowly increasing, the situation continues to be very problematic. Sugarcane accounts for a majority of the irrigation water in the state, even though sugarcane is only grown on less than 3% of the gross cropped area. The area under sugarcane is increasing all over Maharashtra despite the water scarcity (GoI 2007). This trend is particularly disturbing, because the net return per unit of water generated by sugarcane is estimated to be very low when compared to food grains (Kalamkar 2011). It is a highly contested endeavour to give so much water to a water intensive crop in a semi–arid region, instead of giving the water to wider areas of other crops.

Because most of the sugarcane is grown in Western Maharashtra, it makes sense that Western Maharashtra gets the major share of irrigation resources (GoM 2013b, 4). Vidarbha on the contrary, gets much less of the state's resources for irrigation development. Vidarbha has an uneven terrain, high water run–off and shallow soil, so the need for protection and integrated watershed development is crucial. But the region lags far behind in irrigation development (GoI 2006). There are many irrigation projects (planned or realized) – pump sets, dams, and watershed projects – a big share of which has never materialised or does not function properly (Phansalkar 2005). In Vidarbha, 13% of the gross cropped area is irrigated, compared to 14% in Marathwada and 21% in the Rest of Maharashtra. Within Vidarbha, however, there are huge differences between Amravati division (6%) and Nagpur division (26%) (GoM 2013b, 87).

There are two main reasons for the slow irrigation development in Vidarbha. The first reason is that the elites ruling the state have more incentives to develop Western Maharashtra and its sugarcane production (see section 1 of this chapter). Additionally, corruption is extremely high when it comes to irrigation development. A case in point is the Maharashtra irrigation scam that included 32 irrigation projects in Vidarbha and more in the Rest of Maharashtra when the irrigation portfolio was under Ajit Pawar of the Nationalist Congress Party. The scam became public after it turned out that the government has spent Rs 70,000 crore between 1999 and 2009 for irrigation, but that the irrigation potential increased only by 0.1% in the entire state. The government was accused of a fraud amounting to Rs 35,000 crore. In 2012, the government gave a clean chit to Ajit Pawar. But the new government elected in 2014 has reopened the investigations (dna 2015; Jog 2012 in *The Business Standard*).

The second reason for the slow irrigation development in Vidarbha though, is the high forest cover in Vidarbha, particularly in the East. Many irrigation projects in the region involve some forestland and therefore attract the provision of the Forest Act of 1980, which further stalls their construction (GoI 2006; Phansalkar 2005). There is one last point that makes the irrigation of agricultural land in Vidarbha difficult: the load shedding for about 12 hours a day impedes the functioning of pumps for irrigation.

Consequently, Vidarbha's agriculture heavily depends on rainfall. This leads to major problems caused by erratic rains during monsoon, moisture stress during post–monsoon season and drought stress in the dry season (GoI 2006).

2.3 Crops, Yields and Profitability

The majority of farmers grow a variety of different crops, even the marginal farmers. In *kharif* (monsoon season) nearly all farmers cultivate, but in *rabi* (dry season), when cultivation depends on soil moisture, only roughly 20% of the farmers cultivate – mostly the bigger landowners and others with access to irrigation. In *kharif*, the major crops are cotton, sorghum, soybean, green gram and some pulses. Cotton can easily count for more than half of the cultivated area (rice is also grown, but mostly in the Eastern districts). However, soybean is catching up. In *rabi*, mostly pulses such as gram as well as wheat are grown. Most of the farmers use several mixed crop systems, e.g. cotton and pigeon pea. There are considerable differences between various districts. Buldhana grows little soybean, cotton and a lot of sorghum and some sunflowers in *kharif* and mainly gram in *rabi*. Wardha grows a lot of soybean in *kharif* and also cotton but little sorghum, and in *rabi* gram and a lot of wheat. Yavatmal, like Buldhana, grows mainly cotton, but also soybean in *kharif*, and gram and wheat in *rabi* (GoI 2007; GoM 2013b; Phansalkar 2005).

The yields differ greatly across the regions. For cotton, Maharashtra (with Vidarbha and Marathwada as the major cotton growing areas) has an average productivity of 343 kg lint per ha. That is very low compared to the Indian average of 510 kg lint/ha. For soybean region-wide data is available. Vidarbha has a very low productivity of 1445 kg/ha compared to the1900 kg/ha in Western Maharashtra (GoM 2013b, 237 ff; also Kannan 2015). The Government of Maharashtra posited low area of irrigation, low quality of soil as well as small landholdings as the main reasons for relatively lower productivity (GoI 2007; GoM 2013b). In recent years, soil erosion is increasing and rainfall patterns are changing, which has affected productivity. Rainfall, in particular, is inadequate and has changed in terms of temporal distribution, which greatly affects agricultural yields in quantity as well as year-to-year fluctuations (GoM 2013b, 231).

When it comes to profitability, a Government of India report on Vidarbha (GoI 2006) calculated that agriculture had the potential to be profitable also in Vidarbha. In reality, however, agriculture is far from being profitable for many farmers – having a gross profit (revenue minus costs) of often less than 4–5000 Rs/ha. The report compares the MSP for cotton, sorghum, and soybean for the year 2004-2005 under irrigated conditions. They find that in case of sorghum and cotton, the MSP is higher than all paid costs (including rent for land and family labour), but lower than the cost of production if interest on owned capital and the rental value of the owned land is included. The fact-finding report (GoI 2006) found very high net returns of about 12,500 Rs/ha for irrigated Bt cotton in Vidarbha, and for local cotton varieties only 4300 Rs/ha. For soybean, the MSP is also higher than the costs, including interest on owned capital and the rental value of the owned land. On the contrary, Pant (2012, 84) analysed the profitability of agriculture in Vidarbha (based on reports of the Commission for Agricultural Costs and Prices and Reports on Cost of Cultivation on Principle Costs in India) and found that for all crops the MSP was lower than the costs of production (including the interest of owned capital assets and the rental value of owned land). Pant

concludes that the MSP does not cover the costs of production and often leads to negative farm incomes, which also fluctuate strongly from year to year (ibid, 94; Shroff et al. 2015, 63).

However, these are only average values and as has become clear in chapter II, it is important to differentiate between the different sizes of landholdings. Pant (2012) as well as Ramakumar et al. (2009) have conducted case studies in Vidarbha villages to analyse the agricultural costs, profitability and incomes depending on different landholding sizes and castes. The cost of production per acre is much higher for smaller landholdings and the profitability declines with declining landholdings. Ramakumar et al. (2009, 144) showed that the costs per acre decrease from 4810 Rs/acre for households cultivating one acre to 1668 Rs/acre for households cultivating 18 acres. This also shows in the profitability ratio per acre that increases from 1.7 to 2.5. In terms of castes, the profitability ratios per households were 2.1 for castes of the general category, 2.0 for OBCs, 1.7 for SCs and only 1.6 for STs (ibid, 146).

The study by Pant showed that the total farm incomes per household range from 3000 Rs/household for the smallest landholdings to more than Rs 150,000 per household (Pant 2012, 93), or from Rs 6621 per household (for households cultivating one acre) to Rs 40,078 per household (for households cultivating 12 acres) or even Rs 130,540 (for households cultivating 51 acres)(Ramakumar et al. 2009, 145). Additionally, Parasuraman and Rajaretnam (2011) have found in their study that landless labourers and marginal farmers earn roughly Rs 45,000 per year per household, small farmers around Rs 60,000, semi–medium farmers more than Rs 90,000 and medium and large farmers as much as Rs 180,000. Along with Ramakumar et al., Pant reaffirms that there are not only big differences in profitability between the different sizes of landholdings, but also between the different castes. OBC farmers had considerably higher profitability than ST farmers (ibid, 94). Ramakumar et al. (2009, 146) showed that farm incomes per households range from Rs 23,115 for general category, Rs 15,783 for OBC, Rs 12,772 for SC and Rs 5214 for ST.

An additional factor that determines the income is the (cotton) varieties used. In particular, there is a debate about the productivity of Bt cotton. While Hybrid cotton with the associated increase of inputs was already introduced by the state in the 1970s, Bt cotton was introduced in 2002 to control bollworm and other lepidopteron pests. It has spread rapidly and is now grown on 90% of India's cotton growing area. Most studies suggest that Bt cotton can generate high yields particularly in irrigated situations, while it can create negative cost–benefit ratios under rain–fed conditions. Pant (2012, 37) reviews the evidence and suggests that Bt cotton has mostly led to increased farm incomes (see also Rawal and Swaminathan 2011, for a comment on the topic). Partially in contradiction to this assessment, a recent study comes to the conclusion that this might be true for irrigated farming. But the study found that the costs of the Bt-seeds combined with the costs for insecticide increase the risk for bankruptcy in low-yield, rain-fed cotton (Gutierrez et al. 2015, for an overview over the debate see Herring 2015). In the same line, Deshpande and Arora (2010) argue that the

low level of irrigation together with heavy infestation of pests is the reason why many cotton farmers in Vidarbha live below the poverty line despite their relatively big landholdings.

2.4 Credit Availability

A large portion of all farmers is indebted and marginal farmers are most likely to be indebted. In Vidarbha, there is a credit–gap of roughly 50% between agricultural credit demand and availability. Earlier, co-operative banks were very important in Maharashtra but now only a miniscule part of the demand for rural credit is covered through institutional credits from banks or rural co-operative societies. Now the co-operative banks have a high level of outstanding loans as well as high interest rates. Increasingly, the people on the list of defaulters of banks and co-operative societies fall out of the formal credit system and have to rely on their social network or moneylenders (GoI 2006). This is the same trend observed all over India, where particularly small and marginal farmers face increasing difficulties in accessing institutional loans and thus have to rely on moneylenders (see section 2.3, chapter II)

The following table illustrates the differences in loans per hectare between the regions (GoM 2013b, 247). Again it can be seen that farmers in the regions of Vidarbha and particularly Marathwada get much less credit per hectare and have much lower access to loans than those in the Rest of Maharashtra.

Table 6: Loan-related indicators for different regions of Maharashtra (GoM 2013b, 247).

	Vidarbha	**Marathwada**	**Rest of Maharashtra**
Loan per ha (in % of cost of cultivation)	7.3%	6.3%	14.3%
Loan per cultivator	4487 Rs	3354 Rs	6060 Rs
Average number of cultivators (during last 5 years) availing credit	21%	24%	55%
Loan distribution per ha	2098 Rs	1727 Rs	3909 Rs

The data from researchers and the government on the agricultural situation in Vidarbha clearly show that the situation is severe for farmers with marginal, small and medium – particularly rain-fed – landholdings. The disparity in irrigation between the Vidarbha (and Marathwada) and other regions of Maharashtra has far-reaching consequences. It is expressed in terms of gross cropped area or electrical consumption or the share in outstanding loan and overdues in the credit co-operative societies, all of which are much higher in Western Maharashtra. In Western Maharashtra, where all these indicators are better, farmers can apply higher doses of agricultural inputs, utilise low cost credit capital for high valued agricultural assets and also have higher ownership of high valued agricultural machinery. For less developed regions like Vidarbha, it is a vicious cycle (Mohanty 2009).

3 Voices from Vidarbha

In the context of the above evidence, I now analyse how the farmers in Vidarbha (i.e. in the villages covered by this study) themselves perceive their situation, what their most severe problems are and how they analyse the situation of different classes of farmers and labourers. To start with, I introduce the five villages where I have conducted interviews. In section 3.2, I explore what the people see as their most pressing problems, what explanations they come up with, and how they themselves analyse their situation.

3.1 Villages in Vidarbha

As I already mentioned (chapter I, section 3), I have chosen the villages according to the 'movement' groups' activities, and the interviews that I have conducted mostly focus on 'movement'-relevant issues. The following descriptions are therefore short introductions of the study villages, based on discussions with members of the *gram panchayat*[43], often the *sarpanch*[44], or other persons who know the village well.

Village SSS[45]

Village SSS is located in Buldhana, the Western most of Vidarbha's districts (Amravati division). It is a big village, has a hospital at the village entrance and a bank branch. Most of the houses are small, made of mud, wood, and pieces of metal. But in the neighbourhoods belonging to labourers, the huts are very small and stand in sharp contrast to the bigger houses at the centre of the village. In the central area, houses are mostly built in a traditional style, are bigger, have several rooms or even two floors. The village had roughly 3,000 inhabitants at the time of the study. The predominant communities are Nomadic Tribes (NT) who mostly control the land, as well as Buddhists.

A majority of the population is involved in agriculture. There is quite a high level of out–migration of young men, particularly by marginal and small farmers' and labourers' households. The young men migrate mostly on a seasonal basis and go to nearby towns to work on construction sites at times of low agricultural workload. These young men often complain that there was no local industry nearby that would provide employment opportunities and that could purchase the agricultural produce at a better price.

About half of the farmers are marginal and small farmers who own less than five acres of land. About one fourth of the villagers have no land at all. Another fourth are semi–medium or medium farmers, very few of whom have more than 25 acres of land. The main crops are cotton, sorghum, onion and soybean. Many farmers reported having invested in bore wells and about half of the total land cultivated is irrigated.

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[43] A *gram panchayat* is the self-government on the level of village or small town, part of the three-tier government system of Maharashtra (see section 3.4, chapter II).

[44] A *sarpanch* is an elected head of the *gram panchayat*.

[45] As mentioned before (chapter I, section 3), I name the villages according to the group that had led me there.

Village KAA

Village KAA is located in Wardha district (Nagpur division), about a two hours journey by bus from the city of Nagpur. It consists of three parts – an old colony, a new colony and another village a five-minute walk away under the same *gram panchayat*. The road goes first to the small new colony of not even a dozen houses. Here, half of the houses are quite big and made of bricks, while the other half are small or very small mud houses. The bigger houses stand mostly apart from each other and are lined up along the main road. In the middle, near to the main road, there is a big well and a small grocery stall. From here, the road leads further through a tiny forest and then enters the old colony. The houses here are rather smaller and narrower. Even the big houses are mostly mud houses with wooden carvings. Just after entering the new colony, there is a small village temple next to a huge tree. The third part of the village is again towards the road and north of the new colony. Here, most houses were very small with only one or two rooms.

Picture 2: New colony in village KAA

Village KAA is a small but wealthy village. At that time, the population consisted of more than 1,000 people. The majority of the population belongs to the Hindu religion. Considerable minorities are Buddhists and Muslims. Around one fifth of the population belonged to the Nomadic Tribes (NT). Many of them belong to a sub-caste whose original occupation was masonry. The ex–*sarpanch*, also from this sub–caste, explained that their forefathers' occupation had been *"to make houses for other people, but not for us. We were just wandering from place to place for a livelihood, with a couple of livestock."* Once his father had been working in this village and one man had suggested that they settle down and buy some land. This dominance of masons, so he explained, was the reason for the many big, solidly constructed houses with hardly any furnishings.

There was considerable out–migration in the late 20th century; particularly agricultural labour had migrated to towns and cities or nearby industrial areas to find work. Consequently, there was, according to the *sarpanch* and many interviewed farmers, a

scarcity of labourers for agricultural work, particularly in seasons of sowing and harvesting. While many labourers from this village had left some time back, the village is now experiencing an in–migration. The *sarpanch* pointed out that the farmers would often need to hire agricultural labour from other villages. Sometimes "*they get settled here because they get good wages and work throughout the year.*" About 200 people have come and settled down in the village in the last five years.

There are some, but relatively fewer, marginal farmers in this village. Most farmers are small, medium or even semi–medium with up to 10 acres of land. Landholdings of more than 10 acres and even big landholdings of 25 acres or more are not uncommon, though. Furthermore, quite a high number of farmers have leased 10–30 acres each. Considering that around half of the fields are irrigated, the farmers have a reasonable amount of landholdings. This high level of irrigation is due to a dam close to the village. The canals flow through many fields and for an annual fee, the farmers can use the water to irrigate their fields. Consequently, these farmers can grow cotton – the main crop – in the *kharif* season and wheat or vegetables in the *rabi* season. Farmers also grow sorghum, soybean and *tur*.

Village VJAS

Village VJAS is located in Yavatmal, one of the remotest areas in Western Vidarbha (Amravati division). A large part of Yavatmal is hilly and covered with forest. Most of the fields are rain-fed and the standing crops often look quite poor. The houses of village VJAS are almost exclusively very small, consist of one or two small rooms, and are made of mud, wood, leaves or straw. Hardly any houses are made out of bricks, let alone a second floor. Some of the owners of those houses are big landholders or have a moneylending business; others have found another profitable business outside agriculture.

Picture 3: Village VJAS and surrounding hills

Village VJAS was a very small village and had a population of roughly 1,000 people at the time of the study. A large majority (roughly two third) of the people belong to Scheduled Tribes (ST) communities. Earlier, many STs families lived in the forests and they still stay close to the forest. They use minor forest produce to support their livelihood. About one third of the village belong to NTs – mostly to *Banjaras* – including the village activist. The rest of the population belonged to OBCs. All inhabitants belong to the Hindu religion.

This village is the poorest and most remote village by far. The next town is far away, houses are small and so are the farmers' plots. For the huge majority of the population, agriculture is the main income source. About two third are farmers, one third are landless labourers. Many farmers share their few acres among big joint families. Nearly half of villagers are marginal farmers; around one fourth are small farmers. There are a few semi–medium farmers (more than 5 acres), while there are only very few farmers owning more than 10 acres. The main crop in this village is cotton, but farmers also grow soybean, sorghum, some wheat and gram. Hardly any of the fields are irrigated through wells on farms or streams. Village VJAS lies in the so-called Naxalite area and so there is no load shedding.

Village BKS

Village BKS is located at a big highway in the Northeast of Nagpur (Nagpur division). One part of the village borders the highway and consists of the typical shops and stalls selling *samosa*, *poha*, bread *pakoda* and *chai*, chocolate, chips and soft drinks. This part of the village has a paved road and concrete houses. A little more towards the market square and the centre of the village, the houses become older and are made out of mud and wood, but are still decent. The village's market square is large and surrounded by many grocery shops of all sorts. Leaving the market away from the highway, the new colonies begin, with small houses made out of mud, wood and leaves.

The village had over 9,000 inhabitants at that time. Most of the people are involved in farming in one way or another. Of the people whose main source of income is agriculture, most are small farmers, marginal farmers or labourers. But there are also many medium and large farmers, as well as some big landholders who own up to hundred acres of land[46]. The major crops are cotton, soybean, wheat, gram and some orange orchards. Most of the cultivated land is rain-fed and only about 10% is irrigated. The village, however, is wealthy and well connected. Many of its people have some other businesses in nearby towns or cities, where they earn their money. The main religion is Hindu, while there are some Muslim and Buddhist families. The proportions of SC (less than 10%) and ST (around 5%) are quite small. Main castes are *Teli*, *Mali*, *Kunbi* (all OBC).

[46] The land is then mostly registered in the name of several family members in order to circumvent the ceiling laws for land ownership.

Villages AIKS

Interviews from the AIKS group came from three different villages (all Wardha district, Nagpur division). The largest village is located at the edge of the district's capital, a small town south of Nagpur. At the time of the study, the village had around 7,000 inhabitants; this number has been increasing in recent years. The majority of the village are Hindus (many Telis) and some are Buddhists. The village is divided into an old and a new colony. Small mud houses dominate the old part, where the majority of the population is still closely connected to agriculture. In the new part, houses are bigger, made of concrete, and most inhabitants are involved in non-agricultural business. The main crops are cotton, soybean, wheat, *tur* and *gram*, while cotton is by far the most important one. More than half of the land is irrigated, and most of these landholdings are small or semi-medium.

The new colony has been particularly responsible for the high growth in population. Because the village is so close to the district headquarters, people involved in non-agricultural business migrated to the new colony, especially staff from the nearby hospital. Many farmers, especially from the old colony, have sold off their land, for example to the near-by hospital, and started to work in the nearby ginning factory (based on Wynistorf 2012).

The other two villages are located in the same district but are further away from the district capital. The two villages are independent from each other, but close to one another. One village had about 1,300 inhabitants at the time of the study, and the other one, about 1,200. Like in the first village, the majority of the population is Hindu and some are Buddhists. Many Teli live in these villages. In both villages, nearly all inhabitants are involved in agriculture. The major crops are similar to the first village, but sugarcane is an additional important crop. About half of the fields are irrigated and there are many semi-medium and even medium landholdings.

The description of the villages studied is summarized in the following table. It shows that the villages differ in many respects. In all villages, I interviewed mostly those farmers that support the 'movement'[47] groups in question and asked them about how they perceive their own situation and what they see as the main problems of agriculture in general and among the different groups of farmers in particular.

[47] To clarify, in this part, the interviews of activists and leaders of the 'movement' are not included. It is only the interviewed supporters and some non-supporters.

Table 7: Overview over visited villages

Village	District	Inhabi-tants	Major Caste and religious groups	Crops	Irri-gation	Landholdings
SSS	Buldhana	3,000	NT, Neo-Buddhists	Cotton, sorghum, onion, soybean	Half	About a fourth landless/labour, half marginal and small, one fourth medium and semi-medium, few rich
KAA	Wardha	1,000	NT, Neo-Buddhists and Muslims	Cotton, wheat, vegetables	Half	Labour often from elsewhere, few marginal and many small, most medium and semi- medium , some rich (often leased-in)
VJAS	Yavatmal	1,000	ST, NT, OBC	Cotton, soybean, sorghum	Nearly none	One third landless/labour, half marginal forth small, few medium and semi- medium , very few rich
BKS	Nagpur	9,000	Muslim, Neo-Buddhist	Cotton, soybean, wheat, orange		Some marginal and small, some medium and semi-medium , some rich (also very rich)
AIKS	Wardha	7,000 1,300 1,200	caste?, Neo-Buddhist	Cotton, soybean, wheat Sugarcane	Majority Half Half	Some marginal/landless, many small and semi-medium Some marginal and small, many semi-medium and medium

3.2 Farmers' Perceptions about Agriculture

In the following, I will depict the interviewed farmers' appraisals of the costs and availability of inputs, their yields and the profitability of their cultivation, and the importance of land.

Land

Land was a prominent issue in all the villages, though in different ways. In village SSS, many participants said that they had to sell off some of their land because of "*family issues*", most often either an illness or accident of a family member, high education fees for children, the bribe for a family member's job somewhere or – last but not least – the dowry to marry away a daughter. Dowry payments were tremendously high and were an issue in many interviews, particularly in this village. Many talked about having had to sell much of their land in order to pay dowries. *"Whenever there was crop failure, my father sold some land. He also married my three sisters with this amount"*, a small farmer said.

Many interviewees reported that these days, the price of the land was increasing. Some expressed their regret about having sold their land earlier and not waiting for the price of land to increase. Others said that in spite of the high prices, they would not want to sell their land, else they would have to quit farming. *"See, the prices of the land increase. But it means nothing for a kisan. The size of the land doesn't increase",* stated a small farmer. Interviewees reported that possible buyers were plenty: businessmen and traders from nearby towns as well as big companies. There were no examples mentioned of other farmers as buyers. *"Because of the demand, the price for land is increasing. Those, who are traders and who have black money, they are the owners of this land. Only for these people it is possible to buy land, for kisans it is not possible anymore",* said a medium farmer. Also in village KAA, several interviewees reported that "*some big industry owners (…), foreign companies are coming here. They want our land for industry plantations. Here the environment is good for wheat and soybean.*" Further, in village VJAS in particular, the government was a player in the land market. Five years ago, when the government had started building a dam near the village, many farmers were forced to sell their land and received a small compensation (see section 2.1, chapter V).

More than in other villages, farmers often leased land in village VJAS, mostly from big landowners from other villages. The ones who leased land for cultivation complained that if the rent for the land had to be paid as well, production became even more expensive and they were not able to pay the yearly rent. In village SSS, several interviewees complained that they had to lease in a few or many acres in order to earn a decent living out of agriculture. Others wished they could lease, but they had no money. Further, some said they needed urgent money and instead of selling their land, they would rather lease it out. In village BKS, interviewees rather thought about leaving farming all together, selling or leasing out their land, and looking for a more profitable occupation in nearby towns or cities.

Labour

In all villages, interviewed farmers often complained that the wages for labour were too high and the government would pamper the labourers by giving them subsidized food. Interviewees often argued that through the Public Distribution System (PDS) that allows people who officially live below the poverty line to buy the most important goods, e.g. wheat, sugar and kerosene, at subsidized rates, labour would get cheap food and therefore they would drink and not work. In villages KAA and AIKS, interviewees reported that the scarcity of labour because of out-migration meant that farmers had to hire labour from other villages. These labourers at times asked higher wages and the farmers would have to pay for the transportation costs. In village BKS, where among the interviewees hardly anyone worked as agricultural labour, these complaints about the high wages for and unavailability of labour were particularly prominent.

Labour in all other villages, on the contrary, reported the same story of one labourer who told me that *"the wage is not enough to fill the stomach"*. All interviewed labourers complained that their wages were too low and at the same time, that the price for food was increasing. It was, so many labourers argued, impossible to negotiate wages, because the farmers would simply fix them. When there was no rain and therefore hardly any work, the wages were very low or they got no wages at all. In VJAS village, virtually all farmers also worked as labourers because of the small size of landholdings and the lack of irrigation. The returns from agricultural production being low, farmers said that they relied on agricultural work on other farmer's fields or also on other forms of labour[48] – e.g. *tendu*[49] leaf cutting in the forest. There were no complaints about the high cost of labour, but only about the low wages in village VJAS.

Inputs

Apart from land and labour, other inputs were reasons for complaints as well. Farmers from all villages reported that fertilizer, seed and pesticides were of low quality but high cost. In village SSS, a small farmer explained that

> *"sometimes the prices go up or down. These trade people are making good profit, because the government doesn't fix the prices for crops and fertilizer. In June, the prices for seeds are low, but the kisans they don't have money that time, very few have, only rich kisans have. In July, the prices of seeds will be high, so it is difficult for the kisans to buy it."*

But even if farmers would manage to bring up the money to buy the inputs in time, there could be supply shortages in local markets. Additionally, farmers are not sure of the quality of the inputs, particularly the seeds, and often realize only after sowing that their seeds are spurious or that the fertilizers' chemical composition is useless.

Additionally, many farmers, as one marginal farmer explained, would be unable to read and understand the direction for use on the packages and would therefore not be well

[48] Migration, though, seemed a negligible issue in village VJAS. People could name only one family that had gone away and only very few other families migrated seasonally.

[49] *Tendu* leaves are used as wrapping paper for the local *beedi* cigarettes.

informed. *"The educated kisans will see the expiry date on the seeds packet or on the fertilizer packet, this is different between educated and uneducated kisans. (…) In the market, traders are making fools of the uneducated kisans"*, a young medium farmer said.

Yield and Irrigation

Concerning yield, the interviewed farmers' estimations differed. Most interviewees in village SSS said that their yields had been quite satisfactory. Most of the interviewees in village KAA reported that their yields were good. On the contrary, farmers in village VJAS as well as several from the other villages complained that their yields had been very low and that they very often experienced total or partial crop failure. Natural calamities and particularly the unreliability of rains had hit the farmers hard. Many complained that in some years there is *"excessive rain that washes away everything, all fertilizer, the whole yield is gone"*, while in other years there were droughts, as rains came late or insufficiently. In village SSS, interviewees complained about too little rain, while in the other villages, excess rain was the problem. Many interviewees observed that in the recent years, the rains had become less and less predictable. A small farmer of village VJAS felt that *"before, the weather was in favour of kisans. But now, rains don't come in time."*

Many argued that those who had access to irrigation could be sure of their yields. A medium farmer in village SSS owning only rain–fed land said *"it depends on the type of land. Some have good irrigation facilities, they will make good yields. (…) But I don't have money to construct the water well"*. A small farmer without irrigation complained that *"those who have irrigation, they are always happy"*. In village VJAS, irrigation is an important matter of concern. In this village, only a marginal part of the fields is irrigated and interviewees were aware that with irrigation measures, agricultural production would be higher and more reliable. In village KAA, where most of the fields were irrigated, several interviewees mentioned that irrigation was a matter of luck. One small farmer complained, *"some kisans have their fields close to the canals. But I need one lakh Rupees to construct a well in my field. And I get no benefit from the government schemes."*

Those farmers with irrigated fields, however, complained about a high risk of crop failures even in irrigated fields, be it due to floods, excess rain, crop diseases or the ravaging of of wild animals. Many of them also complained about deteriorating soil conditions as well as decreasing water levels in their wells. For these farmers, electricity and load shedding are a major problem. In village SSS, where about half of the fields were irrigated, interviewees complained that they did not get the amount of electricity that had been promised to them. *"As per the central government, there is supply of 17–18 hours each day, but this MSEB [Maharashtra State Electricity Board], they give the power only for 6–7 hours. So where is the rest?",* a medium farmer asked. Without any electrical supply, even farmers with irrigation facilities cannot properly irrigate their fields.

The interviewed farmers had two different explanations for the differences in yields. First, some farmers (namely a few medium and rich farmers in village SSS and KAA) emphasized that the incorrect use of inputs was the reason for the low yields of other

farmers. One argued that *"I worked very hard in the field and I have done the cultivation properly. So my yield was good".* A farmer of village KAA who owned 5 acres of land and leased another 17 acres said that *"my yield was good (...). To make farming profitable, there is a need to give all treatment on time, water also. Then only there will be good yield. The other kisans are not doing these things on time. (...) Kisans have no knowledge which seeds they need to use, when, which fertilizer."* Many interviewees in villages KAA and AIKS emphasized the lack of knowledge and training on how to farm properly, particularly how to use organic and other low-cost practices. Some of the interviewees pointed out that farmers don't know when to apply fertilize or pesticides, in what amount and which product should be applied. Several interviewees mentioned that farmers need to be aware of the condition of their fields. So if one field was salty, rain–fed or prone to floods, the farmer should not invest too much money in it because the yield would most likely not be very satisfactory. So even with low yields, the farmers would not be in loss.

Many other farmers, of course, saw this differently, which leads to the second explanation. Small and marginal farmers, particularly in village VJAS, emphasized that the lack of money was the cause for their low yields, along with irrigation, which is connected to available capital. Because they didn't have enough money, farmers could not buy seeds and fertilizer in time and therefore could not sow their crops at the right time or fertilize properly. In case of a pest attack or an outbreak of a disease, they were unable to buy and apply the necessary pesticides and therefore suffered from a high risk of crop failure. Marginal and small farmers of other villages shared this view as well. A marginal farmer for example, concluded that *"I have no money to buy all this in time. This is the problem"*.

Profitability

One important variable for profitability is the price for agricultural outputs. In general, MSPs defined by the government were perceived to be too low. According to a semi–medium farmer from village SSS, *"it is not possible to survive from these minimum support prices".* The interviewees often repeated that the prices of all products had increased, for agricultural inputs as well as due to general inflation or the wages of government officials. Only the output price for agricultural products, particularly cotton, did not increase at the same pace.

Furthermore, for many interviewees, the price of their outputs was as unpredictable as the rains. Many of them explained that, the year before, the price for cotton had been high and that they were expecting high prices this year as well. However, prices had fallen far below the previous years' prices. A small farmer from village KAA summarized a widely held view: *"We cannot count on the prices. When I have good yield, there are no prices. And when there are* [good] *prices, there is no yield in my hands."* And a medium farmer from village SSS suspected that *"the prices are good only when kisans do not have their crops in their hands".* A rich farmer from AIKS summarized that *"this means there is no guarantee, no guarantee at all."* The MSP was often perceived as too low, and therefore hardly relevant, or farmers reported that it could not be realized in the local

market place because the local procurement agencies of the state did not function properly.

While the complaints went mostly against the government who fixed too low an MSP, the traders were held equally responsible. The government and the traders, so many interviewees said, were hand in glove with each other. The government was accused of creating policies that favoured the traders over the farmers and of having a hands–off approach towards the traders' unfair business practices. Because the MSCCGMF centres (see section 1.2, this chapter) were no longer working, the farmers had no other possibility than to sell their products to the traders. Consequently, the traders, so interviewees said, had relatively more power in price negotiations. *"The traders work against the kisans and cheat them. They are flying in planes because of the kisans*", a medium farmer of village SSS complained.

Particularly in villages SSS and AIKS, people complained strongly about the traders. Most farmers did not have storage facilities or were in urgent need of money, so they had to sell immediately after harvest. The traders took advantage of the farmers' urgency to sell and purchased the produce at cheap prices. After having purchased the cotton from the farmers, the traders would store it to sell it later when prices had gone up. A marginal farmer said that "*last year, the yield was good, but I have sold it as soon as I got the yield. And later the prices increased (…). The trade people are storing the grain and later they are selling it*." To store the harvest at least for some weeks, many farmhouses were stuffed with cotton after the harvest. But one farmer explained that while this was a way to wait until the prices would rise, the farmers would live in fear that the cotton would catch fire and their whole yield would be gone. One cotton cultivator summarized, *"it is not possible to store the crops, that is why I'm in loss."* Several rich farmers, however, had built separate storage houses and managed to earn a much higher price.

Consequently, only a few medium and large farmers in all villages reported that they made a good profit on their crops. In village KAA as in AIKS, interviewees often talked about good yields and even satisfactory prices. The *sarpanch* of village KAA even said that

> *"we have seen those who had once left the village for education and jobs, they are now doing farming because they are earning more from farming. (…) There are some Muslim people* [in this village] *who are educated and belong to well–to–do families. They are also doing farming."*

However, the majority of farmers believed that even if they earned some profit, that would not be enough to send their kids to a good school or to pay for other basic family expenditures. Two marginal farmers even took their kids out of school so they could work in the field. Also in the village KAA, despite the *sarpanch*'s observation, many interviewees reported that they "*couldn't even cover the expenses".* A middle farmer complained

"there is less yield, the expenditure is too high. There is no rain also. Those who have irrigation facilities, they are happy. Some land is very bad in terms of soil quality and therefore we are unable to cover the expenditure. So we are unable to give proper education to the children, to pay the marriage of our daughter or health treatments."

For others, the situation was even worse. A small farmer from village KAA observed that *"I can just cover my expenses. These 4 acres are hardly enough for the family needs. I cannot make any profit."* Another small farmer reported that he had, *"good yield, but there was no profit. I could not even cover the expenses for agriculture."* In SSS and AIKS, many interviewees said that they had been at loss in their agricultural operations. And in village VJAS, where the situation was the worst, all interviewees reported that, regardless of the input costs or the yields, agricultural production *"does not even cover the expenses for farming"* – indicating a negative income. In all villages, but particularly in village VJAS, many interviewees emphasized that they work very hard in the fields, that they do not have any addictions – i.e. do not drink any alcohol – and that they still can't make ends meet.

Picture 4: Stored cotton in a farmers' house

Credits

In this difficult agricultural situation combined with some family problems, nearly all interviewed farmer families reported that they had to take up a loan. Several interviewees narrated how they had applied for an agricultural loan and then had to use the money for another urgent purpose, be it education, the marriage of a daughter or medical treatment. If later the yield was better, the loan could be repaid. But if the crop failed, the farmers ended up in a debt trap. While the situation was serious in all villages, it was worst in village VJAS. The overwhelming majority of interviewees mentioned that they were indebted. Being unable to pay the monthly interest rates or the land rents, the debts of the farmers grew and piled up.

To make it worse, in all villages and particularly in village VJAS, interviewees said that they preferred to borrow from a co-operative bank, but they never received enough credit, so they had to approach moneylenders, mostly big landholders or input traders. A small farmer from village SSS reported that *"the bank doesn't give loan to small kisans. But moneylenders ask for 10% interest rate per month"*. These moneylenders then would come and take away the valuables from the farmers' home. This constituted a big humiliation for farmers, as it was pointed out during interviews.

Employment and Government Schemes

In all villages, interviewed farmers as well as labourers said that their situation was difficult because they did not have any other income source besides agriculture. Reports of family members migrating to nearby towns were rare, particularly in remote villages such as VJAS. In villages KAA, AIKS and SSS, many interviewees reported that jobs outside agriculture were difficult to get. One labourer narrated his experience of seeking a job outside agriculture for his son: *"Job is not for poor people. Because the rich people will give money for the job opportunity."* However, many farmers owned some livestock and were involved in the dairy business. Small farmers in particular emphasised that livestock and livestock-related income were crucial for their livelihood. But then, livestock was often the first asset farmers sold in case of their daughters' marriage or a family member's illness.

Despite the tendency of many interviewees to complain about the government, the interviewees also indicated that schemes to support farmers did exist. While some interviewees were not aware about available schemes or had never applied, others had received some benefit. However, schemes were difficult to access. First because *"even if they [government] give money after the 17th time [we try], we have to travel there, meet the officer, and even they ask for money to get the money"*, a marginal farmer explained. Second, a small farmer from village SSS told, "*the leaders are giving these schemes for the relatives (…). The schemes are only on paper, the local leaders will not implement them in the village, they do not reach the kisans".* A marginal farmer from village KAA summarized his experiences with schemes as follows: *"those who are close to the powerful people, they are getting benefits from the schemes. For a kisan it is not possible to go there many times and ask."*

The problem that schemes did not reach the intended beneficiaries was understood also in a regional dimension. In Western Maharashtra, as many interviewees pointed out, where many powerful politicians came from, the prices were higher, there was less load shedding and the general situation was incomparable. *"See, the packages are coming, but the fund will transfer to Western Maharashtra,"* a medium farmer suspected.

In village VJAS in particular, interviewees highlighted issues related to their ST identity. Interviewees mentioned that their forefathers had lived in the forests and now they lived in villages as farmers. But still, they said, the government neglected them and shied away from providing infrastructure or education. Further, it was difficult for them to get caste certificates or other official documents. Interviewees also complained that they did

not know about government schemes and even if they tried to access them, it seemed impossible for them to get any benefits.

This chapter showed that the topics that the interviewed farmers talked about always circled around the same issues: prices, the costs of inputs, and the lack of irrigation. However, there were also considerable differences in the ways different classes of farmers described their situation. In the next section, I will conclude this chapter by comparing the farmers' perceptions – a comparison that again hints at the contested notion of the 'agrarian crisis' as discussed in chapter II.

4 Concluding Thoughts: What Kind of Crisis in Vidarbha?

The issues that the interviewees brought forward closely correspond with the debates in the literature (see chapter II; section 2, this chapter). Local issues concerning traders and moneylenders, however, have a higher importance in farmers' perceptions than they have in the literature. The interviewees all complained about agricultural profitability and they highlighted many problems. At first sight, this would rather correspond to the arguments for the 'agrarian crisis' that see farmers in trouble irrespective of their landholdings. But at a closer look, it becomes clear that these problems exist to very different extents depending on ownership, landholdings and available capital.

Interestingly, when I asked interviewees explicitly whether there were farmers who were more severely affected, even small and marginal farmers maintained that all farmers were equally affected by the crisis because nobody received remunerative prices for their produce. But when they started explaining their problems in detail, it became clear that many farmers did in fact distinguish between different classes of farmers.

First, when farmers spoke about their yields, they underlined huge differences in yields between different classes of farmers. It was also because the determining factor for higher yield was not understood as climate or pests, but irrigation. All interviewees concurred that irrigation was the major factor behind a good and reliable yield. One small farmer said that *"my land is rain-fed. If there is irrigation facility, then there are a lot of possibilities. But we are fully depending on rain, we are suffering."*

Second, the capital available to invest in agriculture was another important factor underlined by farmers. Many small and marginal – and even medium – farmers could not afford seeds, fertilizer or pesticides. According to them, this resulted in meagre yields on the one hand and in a high risk of crop failure on the other hand. One medium farmer talked about the risk of crop failure due to pests and explained *"those who have money, they are using pesticides, but we are poor, for us it is not possible to use it. So the leaves of my cotton became red and I had no yield".* Some rich farmers mentioned these aspects, but from a completely different perspective. They said that they were able to get better yields because they put the right inputs at the right time for the cultivated crops.

The other farmers, mostly small and marginal, did not have the necessary training or knowledge to do so.

In terms of profit, farmers mostly emphasized that their profit was meagre. Some interviewees explained that not only the yield, but also the realization of good prices depended on the capital available to a farmer. The ones who could afford to store their crops for a long time made use of fluctuating market prices, while the others felt helpless exposed to the same fluctuations. Other interviewees, on the contrary, opposed this view and argued that all farmers faced the same problems. One said that *"those who are rich kisans, they have more problems and those who have small landholding, they have small problems. But the situation is the same for all."*

When farmers spoke about the low prices and therefore low profitability, the majority of interviewees complained that they could *"not cover the expenses"*. But this expression had different meanings. Farmers with small and rain-fed fields often reported that they had not even been able to cover their expenses for agricultural inputs. Other interviewees referred to basic family expenses. On the other end of the spectrum were the rich farmers who complained about low prices, but their point of reference were rather people in other professions such as government officials or urban workers. They complained that they could not afford to send their children to English medium schools or marry off their daughters according to their social status.

The crux of the matter can be gauged from the radically different perspectives emerging from the interviews about land, labour and regional disparities. The large farmers and landlords emphasised the problem of the "*labour shortage*" (which purportedly arose because small and marginal farmers and landless labourers were pampered by government schemes, turning them into lazy drunkards) which lowered their profits from agriculture. On the other hand, the interviews and observations were sufficient to conclude that high wages were a myth perpetuated by large farmers. Living and working conditions for the large mass of small and marginal farmers and labourers were pitiable and extreme.

To conclude, while almost all farmers highlighted similar problems, they varied among the different groups of farmers. This clearly shows the importance of taking a differentiated look at what is generally labelled as the 'agrarian crisis'. In spite of this differentiation, though, it became clear that many farmers felt a need to improve their situation. A contradiction emerged when I discussed land and labour issues on which different classes of farmers had radically different perspectives. Thus, several groups are actively trying to mobilize 'the farmers'. It is uncontested that the situation of most people living in villages is severe, although it is increasingly important to reiterate a differentiated take on the 'agrarian crisis' when discussing these mobilisations in the following chapters.

IV. Mobilisation around the 'Agrarian Crisis' in Vidarbha

Who are the groups and activists who mobilize farmers around the 'agrarian crisis' (see section 2, chapter II), and how and why do people become active and mobilize for their issues? In this chapter, I am going to map the mobilisations around agrarian issues in Vidarbha and describe the different activities and demands.

When I came to Maharashtra for the first time, virtually everyone outside Vidarbha told me that there was no longer any farmer movement. The New Farmers' Movement of the late 20th century (see section 2.3, this chapter) had weakened and supposedly nothing had come to fill the void. In Vidarbha itself, however, people started to indicate that even if there was no longer any big farmer 'movement', there were several groups and individual activists mobilizing around agrarian issues. I found that the old movements had indeed fallen apart, but that some fragments were still active (see sections 2.4 and 3, this chapter). In addition, new groups had appeared and gained influence. Several journalists and individual activists were actively keeping the debate over the 'agrarian crisis' alive. These groups, though, were very diverse and only loosely connected. This multitude of groups and activists are in the centre of this study.

First, I will delve into the theoretical debate about concepts of social mobilisation and movements in order to obtain the necessary analytical framework. In section 2, I describe the recent history of farmer movements in Vidarbha as well as their political context before I turn to the contemporary mobilizations in section 3.

1 Approaching Social Mobilisation

At a theoretical level, debates about the conceptualization of social movements are ongoing. In chapter I, I touched upon the different strands of social movement theory and how they have increasingly developed into complementing rather than competing strands. Similarly, the different definitions of social movements have developed increasingly towards broad conceptualizations. In this section I aim to find an analytical nomenclature for the phenomena I have observed in the field.

1.1 Social Movements, Mobilisations and Contentious Politics

Contentious politics mean "*episodic, public, collective interaction among makers of claims and their objects*" (Tarrow 2013, 1) and in a simpler sense it means "*collective political struggles*" (ibid). This notion can include a very broad spectrum of mobilisations: from little sustained forms of contention, such as riots or strikes, to very extensive ones like civil wars or revolution, as well as parts of routine political processes like elections and interest group politics. Somewhere along this broad spectrum lie the social movements. Tarrow (2013) understood them as "*sustained challenges to power holders in the name of a population living under the jurisdiction of those power holders by means of public displays of that population's worthiness, unity, numbers, and commitment*" (ibid, 1). While this definition situates social movements within the broader field of contentious politics,

there are other definitions that seek to define which groups or multitude of groups might be considered a social movement.

Della Porta and Diani (2006) reviewed the definitions that stem from the different schools of social movement theory. They come to the conclusion that all these definitions can be merged into four basic characteristics. Social movements are (1) informal networks, based on (2) shared beliefs and solidarity, which mobilise about (3) conflictual issues through (4) frequent use of various forms of protest (see also Crossley 2002). Snow, Soule, and Kriesi (2011), after the same endeavour, came to five main characteristics. They argue that a social movement consists of (1) joint action with (2) some degree of organization and (3) change-oriented goals. Further, the action needs to be (4) extra or non-institutional and there needs to be (5) a temporal continuity. Compared to Della Porta and Diani, they focus more on action than networks and more on shared goals than on shared beliefs, solidarity and – in other, earlier definitions (see Diani 1992) – on collective identity.

To distinguish social movements from singular outbursts of protest, the fifth point of the latter definition is important: temporal continuity. During their lifetime, social movements can change in terms of their set of actions and actors, their visions and particularly their level of activity. These so called cycles of protest describe periods with a high level of activity, followed by less active periods when groups persist at a low level of activity (see Koopmans 2011; Tarrow 1998). At these low levels of activity is where a broad approach is useful to still recognize them as social movements. These phases of low activity are important for understanding movements in their temporal continuity and particularly for understanding when and how the movements do or do not sustain or become strong again, but they are under-researched (Koopmans 2011).

Social movements are central to a society rather than a "*marginal rejection of order*" (Tourraine 1981, 29), as was conceptualized earlier (see section 1.3, chapter I). Arguably, the number of causes as well as constituencies represented by social movements has increased and the social movement repertoire of protest actions diffused across a broader political and economic spectrum. At the same time, the general public has become increasingly tolerant of different forms of protest and the state authorities have tended to develop negotiation strategies. At the same time, social movement groups – as parts of social movements – have become increasingly formalized and activists have often developed a professional identity. Some social movement groups have narrowed down their tactics and often decided for less disruptive and less threatening tactics that in turn promise to attract broader participation. Through all these processes, social movements have established a permanent presence in today's society (Meyer and Tarrow 1998, Meyer 2013). This omnipresence of political activity that can be labelled as social movement activity has also made it increasingly difficult to provide one overarching definition.

Thus, more inclusive and fuzzy definitions have emerged. There is, for example, a consensus that no single organization, whatever its nature, can constitute a social movement, but only a multitude of organizations and individuals (see e.g. Johnston

2014). Koopmans (1993) emphasized that the defining feature of a social movement is in fact that is difficult to grasp. He argues that "*social movements are characterized by a low degree of institutionalization, high heterogeneity, a lack of clearly defined boundaries and decision making structures, a volatility matched by few other social phenomena*" (ibid, 637). Along the same lines, Bebbington's (2009) definition stuck to the term social movement, but emphasizes processes and fuzzy shared beliefs. He writes that (ibid, 8):

> *"a social movement is a form of collective action but it is not itself an actor, rather it is a process, sustained by a set of actions and actors, in which what prevails is an action motivated by shared grievances and senses of injustice, and therefore by a vision – perhaps not specified – of the need to find another way of organizing society and thinking about development."*

I found this definition very useful in order to capture the complexity of social processes in my field sites (see section 2 of this chapter), particularly also because in a study about social movements and governing poverty, Bebbington (2010) also mapped groups active on the ground and found this exercise helpful to understand that "*the sector is also fractured, with many movements co-existing (and overlapping) in sometimes confusing ways*" (ibid, 1321). I will, therefore, adopt this definition to analyse the multitude of groups and activists mobilizing around the 'agrarian crisis' in Vidarbha.

In the Indian context, SinghaRoy (2010) reviewed the debate about different conceptions of social movements from the perspective of rural India. Very much in line with Bebbington, he introduced the characteristic of 'fluidarity' to the description of movements. He said that they are loosely formed, based on "*temporarily perceived and articulated ideals and common interests, and that many participants tend to be members of more than one collectivities simultaneously*" (ibid, 155). Membership, therefore, is a fluid concept and can be of varying strengths. It is even possible that those collectives, of which one person is part, have contradictory interests or goals. He further argued that this omnipresence of social movement activity that Meyer and Tarrow (1998) described can also be observed in India, where social movements have become a normal part of contemporary rural society (SinghaRoy 2010).

These broad definitions of Bebbington (and SinghaRoy) are helpful in describing the complex realities on the ground, but they bring along a series of questions that will come up repeatedly in the course of this thesis: What are "*shared grievances*" (see chapter II) or a "*shared vision*" – which may not even be specified – and how different can they be in order to still belong to a "*shared*" vision (see chapter VI)? Where does 'one' movement end and another movement begin with another set of actions and actors distinct from the first one (this chapter)? Which groups should be included in the 'movement' around the 'agrarian crisis' in Vidarbha? Can we even speak of 'one movement'?

1.2 Groups within a Movement

Following the broad definition of social movements by Bebbington, the form and nature of groups constituting a social movement are not limited. Usually the groups constituting a social movement are called 'social movement groups' or 'social movement

organizations'. Some of these groups might also be political parties or NGOs. Concerning political parties, I agree with Diani (1992) who argued that it would not matter if different specific social movement groups decide to include participation in the electoral system in their repertoire of activities, because this depends upon external factors such as political opportunity as well as tactical or ideological considerations. Such groups would then "*be part of two different systems of action (the party system and the social movement system), where they will play different roles"* (Della Porta et al. 2006, 27). I will come back to this rather difficult distinction in chapter VI.

Concerning NGOs, I argue that it is more helpful to distinguish between those that explicitly raise political demands and groups that concentrate on providing services. For India, groups that understand themselves as movement groups *sharply* distance themselves from philanthropic, non-political NGOs. Movement groups (including more political NGOs) tend to have a more radical approach to development and try to build the collective capabilities of their constituency to demand rights (Sahoo 2014).

But there are also movement groups that are neither NGOs nor political parties. For an Indian context, Sheth (2004) introduced the term micro-movement to refer to distinct organizations. He specifically refers to groups that became prevalent in the 1970s (often developed out of fragments of earlier political and social movements) and grew until the late 1980s. The early 1990s were a difficult time for micro-movements in India, but they have started to grow again and find strength since the mid 1990s. While they had only *"sporadic successes in changing or influencing government policy, and certainly have not managed to reverse the tide of neo-liberalism",* (Sahoo, 495) they have been important in articulating the interests of the poor and in opposing neoliberal policies.

Sheth (2004) further defines these micro-movements and says that their politics are "*not linked vertically to the macro structures of power and ideology; (…) nor (…) parochially local*" (ibid, 56). He further explains that "*although the movements usually work in local areas they invariably define local issues in trans-local terms*" (ibid). Sheth further says that the politics of those micro-movements *"expands horizontally through several micro-movements*" (ibid, 56). I find the concept of micro-movements useful to describe the single mobilizing groups. I would propose that in terms of organisation, actors and visions, a number of micro-movements can constitute a social movement in the sense defined by Bebbington above. In the larger sense, micro-movements do profess a politics and vision of their own by associating and dissociating themselves from certain ideological strands, although in their everyday activity they might speak of immediate demands.

In section 3 later in this chapter, I will map out the different groups and actors mobilizing around the 'agrarian crisis' in Vidarbha and relate them to the definitions and concepts outlined here. But I would like to introduce terms I find suitable to describe the phenomena I found on the ground: With 'movement' I refer to the multitude of actors and groups that mobilise around the 'agrarian crisis' in Vidarbha; to refer to the individual groups within this movement I use 'movement group' or simply 'group'

(henceforth I use both terms without quotes). This anticipation helps the clarity of the description in section 3.

2 History and Politics in Maharashtra

Before coming to the contemporary movement around the 'agrarian crisis' in Vidarbha, it is important to understand the context in which these mobilisations take place. This includes the political landscape of Maharashtra, because the movement actors formulate their demands and organize their activities within this landscape. It also includes a history of movements of peasants and farmers, because this is where many of the contemporary groups have their roots and where they make many references to.

2.1 Political Landscape of Maharashtra

Activists and supporters I interviewed often expressed their discontent with the Indian National Congress (henceforth: Congress) in particular, which was in power at the state as well as the national government level during the time of this study. To understand these anti-Congress sentiments, it is important to understand the political landscape of the state of Maharashtra.

Since Independence, Congress has been in power in Maharashtra (as well nationally) until 1978, when fissures appeared in its leadership and Sharad Pawar left the Congress. Pawar, who was Chief Minister of Maharashtra three times, was an important figure in the (agricultural) politics of the state and also at the national level, where he later held different positions as a Minister, including as Agricultural Minister from 2004 to 2014. He is a politician who emerged from Western Maharashtra's sugar co-operatives and who stands for the power of the *Maratha-Kunbis* of Western Maharashtra (Lalvani 2009).

From 1978 to 1980, Congress was not in power and Pawar was Chief Minister. In 1980, after a President's rule, Congress came back into power in the State. 1987 Pawar reunited with Congress and became Chief Minister (1988-1991 and 1993-1995). This constellation held until 1995, when a coalition of BJP and *Shiv Sena* (henceforth: Sena) came to power. They lost after only one 5-year legislative term (Lalvani 2009)[50]. In 1999, Sharad Pawar founded his own Party, the Nationalist Congress Party (NCP), and won the subsequent assembly election in coalition with the Congress. This coalition remained in power until 2014 (Lalvani 2009; Palshikar, Birmal, and Ghotale 2010; Palshikar, Deshpande, and Birmal 2009). It was therefore in power at the time of this study.

In the national elections of 2014 however, the BJP-Sena alliance was the clear winner and won 42 of the 48 seats in the *Lok Sabha*[51] – an increase of 21 seats compared to its

[50] The coalition holds despite Shiv Sena's split up before the 2009 elections. The Maharashtra *Navnirman Sena* was founded, but could not build up considerable strength outside the urban centres of the state.

[51] The *Lok Sabha* (engl: House of the People) is the lower house of India's Bicameral-Parliament.

2009 share. The Congress-NCP alliance won only 6 seats, a heavy defeat (Diwakar 2014). The 2014 elections for the legislative assembly in Maharashtra state showed a very similar picture (GoI 2014).

The first major reason for the failure of the Congress in Maharashtra is generally seen as its inability to carry out a minimal program of actions to mobilize the rural people (Kumar 2004). A second reason comes out of the history of the Congress. The Congress in Maharashtra relies heavily on the *Maratha-Kunbis*, which started in the 1920s, when Indian National Congress first grew big and was joined increasingly by non–*Brahmin* elites . Many educated *Brahmins,* in contrast, left the Congress and joined the Hindu *Mahasabha* or the *Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh* (RSS), both of which have a right–wing Hindu nationalist ideology (Rodrigues 1998). Therefore, the Congress became the main party of *Maratha–Kunbis* in Maharashtra and their power steadily grew (Pandit 1979). The *Maratha–Kunbis* managed to capture the elites of other caste groups, particularly in Western Maharashtra, and brought the powerful Congress under their control. But nowadays, the *Maratha–Kunbis* are an increasingly shaky voter base in Maharashtra's politics (Mohanty 2009).

Vidarbha too was once a Congress stronghold, but it started to lose ground already in the 1980s. In Vidarbha, the *Maratha-Kunbi* caste complex has never grown as strong as it has in Western Maharashtra (see section 1.3, chapter III) and even today, *Marathas* are less numerous while there are more Scheduled Tribe and OBC groups (Deshpande 2006; Palshikar 2004). This also weakens the Congress' voter base. In other parts of Maharashtra as well, the voices of *Maratha–Kunbis* and OBCs have become fragmented, which has further weakened Congress. One reason is that *Kunbis* are OBC in Maharashtra, but *Marathas* are not. Therefore, the *Kunbis* have reservation and the *Marathas* do not. *Marathas* have opposed reservation policies but have recently started demanding reservation as well. This demand is seen as absurd by many considering the *Marathas*' dominance in the state (Bureau 2013 in the *Economic Times India*). The *Kunbis* therefore, are part of non–OBC *Maratha* identity socially and politically but at the same time they do not belong to the OBC category. In Maharashtra, *Maratha-Kunbis* as well as OBCs each constitute around 30% of Maharashtra's population (both including the *Kunbis* of roughly 10%).

A third reason for the weakening of Congress in Vidarbha is that communalist forces like the BJP grew very strong in the region. The party has a mostly urban and upper caste leadership, but managed to attract masses of OBC people even in rural areas through their Hindutva and anti–Congress rhetoric, which at the same time facilitated a reconfiguration of caste politics. Additionally, the government of BJP–Sena in the 1990s explicitly promised to 'develop' Vidarbha (Kumar 2004; Lalvani 2009). However, the two allies Shiv Sena and BJP disagree on the demand for separate statehood[52] for Vidarbha. BJP is in favour, while Sena is against the demand (Rodrigues 1998).

[52] Some political groups and activists demand a separate statehood for Vidarbha (namely the 11 most eastern districts of Maharashtra) within the Republic of India. The arguments are the

A fourth reason for the rise of the communalist forces in Vidarbha points to the state of agriculture. On the one hand, the *Maratha-Kunbis* who supported Congress are the dominant landowning caste and some families have managed to accumulate considerable wealth, especially the sugar barons of Western Maharashtra (see section 1.3, this chapter). However, a majority of them in Vidarbha have remained dependent on rain-fed, subsistence agriculture. Consequently, there are huge differences within this caste-complex. Congress has proven to be open only for the first, but not for the second group and thus represented the rich farmers' interests, rather then that of the poor. The latter consequently shifted to BJP-Sena and temporarily to other organisations such as *Shetkari Sanghatana* (Deshpande 2006; Palshikar 2004; Palshikar, Birmal, and Ghotale 2010).

Support for different parties naturally differs among the districts in the region. In 2013's *zilla parishad* elections, Congress and NCP had built a coalition only in Wardha and Buldhana and won in these two districts. In the other five districts, NCP joined hands with other political parties, including BJP and Sena, despite the Congress still being the single largest party in most of these districts. In Yavatmal, NCP won with this former coalition (Bhagwat 2013 in *The Times of India*).

Regarding the 'agrarian crisis', it is very interesting to note that not only Congress but all the coalitions of political parties that have ruled Maharashtra since the 1970s supported the liberalization policies in the state: the Congress governments, Sharad Pawar of the Nationalist Congress Party and also the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP)–Sena coalition. In the realm of agriculture and rural society, all parties have tried to find a balance between populist politics and neoliberal policy–making. While the coalitions emphasized differences in details, they all had the same development perspectives (Palshikar, Birmal, and Ghotale 2010).

To understand political landscape of Maharashtra is crucial to understanding the context of the mobilisations around an 'agrarian crisis'. But apart from the political parties, there have been what we might call social reformers as well as important farmer movements that have shaped the context of the groups active today. I start with a Maharashtrian social reformer, whose name is still omnipresent in contemporary agricultural mobilization.

2.2 Maharashtra's Social Reformers

In Western Maharashtra in the end of the 19th century, the social reformer Jyotirao Govindrao Phule established a movement called *Satyashodhak Samaj*. At that time, an educated middle class and petty bourgeoisie emerged among non–*Brahmins,* particularly among *Maratha-Kunbis*. They were English–educated and criticised the existing social system. It was from among this class that Phule's *Satyashodhak Samaj* emerged as a direct attack on the caste system. While it sought in particular to end *Brahmin* domination, it was also opposed to other upper castes, merchants and

geographical distance from Maharashtra's capital Mumbai, the historical and cultural differences, as well as the perceived domination of Western Maharashtra (see section 1.1, part III).

moneylenders (Omvedt 1973a; Pandit 1979). Even if Phule's supporters stemmed mostly from urban centres and his influence on the peasantry was modest, he strongly sympathised with agriculturalists. He urged the British government to improve the peasants' situation through the introduction of compulsory primary education, the provision of credit and other facilities. After the First World War and the strengthening of democratic institutions, political awareness increased and the situation of the *Satyashodhak Samaj* changed. A sizable minority of *Brahmins* supported the non–*Brahmin* movement's association with Indian National Congress and worked together with other *Satyashodhak Samaj* activists in going from village to village promoting Phule's and Gandhi's ideas. It has even been argued that *Satyashodhak Samaj* had by then become a peasant–based mass movement (Omvedt 1973b; Rodrigues 1998). Later with increasing political power, the *Satyashodhak Samaj* activists' enthusiasm for social reforms decreased and the movement dissociated itself from Ambedkar's emerging movement against untouchability. Therefore, "*Phule's dream of a united revolutionary movement of the shudras*[53] *and the untouchables proved to be ephemeral*" (Pandit 1979, 431). Phule nevertheless remains an important idol for many farmer activists, long after his death in 1890.

Phule is conceived as a leader of the farmer movement both in the literature and in interviews. But the talk about the conflict of *Maratha-Kunbis* and *Brahmins* should not conceal the immense importance of another movement that arose at the same time. In the 1920s, Bhimrao Ambedkar launched a major anti-untouchability movement and fought for the political rights of the Scheduled Castes. Ambedkar's movement rigorously aimed at abolishing the caste system and succeeded in mobilizing masses of the Scheduled Castes. Following Ambedkar's public conversion to Buddhism in Nagpur, many SCs converted to Buddhism too, showing a strong rejection of the low status ascribed to large portions of the society in caste hierarchy and of the structural impossibility of changing this kind of discrimination (Dahiwale 1995; Mohanty 2009; Pandit 1979). Although the movement started in Maharashtra, it had a huge influence all over the country. In Vidarbha, the SCs, unlike the *Marathas*, did not have any tradition of political power. The SCs were poor farmers and agricultural labourers and faced extreme oppression through the caste system; therefore, Ambedkar's movement gained major influence (Mohanty 2005).

Ambedkar's movement has had a huge importance for Indian society. However, because Ambedkar is not specifically mentioned as a farmer leader and agricultural issues were not his focus, I concentrate on major peasant and farmer movements that have shaped the landscape of peasant mobilization in India after Independence.[54]

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[53] The *Shudras* are the lowest social order of the Hindu caste system. Traditionally they belong to the service class and labourers.

[54] There are different ways to categorize farmer movements in India. A major one distinguishes between pre-British, British or colonial and post-Independence (for an overview see Shah 2004a). For this study, I concentrate on the post-Independence movements.

I would like to make one remark about the terminology. In section 1, I elaborated on the different definitions and conceptualizations of social movements. The next section is about what we call peasant movements and the New Farmers' Movements in India after Independence – both terms generally used. In order to analyse whether or not these different historical movements would qualify as a movement in the sense outlined in section 1 or rather as movement groups, I would need to go into greater depth about the different groups and activists that constituted these movements. This is not the focus of this study and I therefore adopt the widely used terminology.

2.3 Movements of Peasants and Farmers

Omvedt (1993) suggested categorizing post-Independence movements into old and new movements. She conceptualizes the old movements as peasant movements and the new movements as farmers' movements. In this argumentation, the term 'peasant' refers to the subsistence-oriented peasantry and the term 'farmers' refers to a market-oriented agricultural population. In this section, I am going to introduce the characteristics of these two different types of movements as well as the debate that has followed this categorization.

The old movements, as Omvedt argued, had a distinct class character as movements of the rural proletariat. Their major demands were "*land to the tiller*", namely land reforms, as well as the abolition of landlordism and usury. They succeeded in uniting farmers, tenants and agricultural labourers. In the 1940s, the old peasant movements had been strong and led major peasant struggles, most importantly the Telengana and Tebhaga struggles in Andhra Pradesh and West Bengal respectively[55]. These leftist peasant movements were also successful in the 1950s and 1960s, but they became weaker in the 1970s.

The leading leftist organization was, however, the *All India Kisan Sabha (AIKS)* (Shah 2004a), the farmers' wing of the Communist Party of India (Marxist) (CPI(M)). The Russian Revolution brought socialist ideas into play in Indian politics, which led to the founding of the Communist Party. Its leadership was mainly from upper–caste intellectuals, though its followers were from the industrial proletariat. Consequently, after Independence, intellectuals of non–*Brahmin* castes founded another socialist party, the Peasants and Workers Party (*Shetkari Khamgar Paksha*). It survived only in a few urban areas and failed to gain mass support in rural areas. The Communist Party and other left-wing forces gained ground in many regions of India, namely Kerala, West Bengal and Tripura (Omvedt 1973a). The Communist Party experienced several splits and therefore, several sections exist even today, most prominently the Communist Party of India, the Communist Party of India (Maoist) and the Communist Party of India (Marxist). Spontaneous and organized peasant struggles along with the foundation of

[55] The Telangana rebellion was a peasant rebellion against the feudal landlords in the later Andhra Pradesh between 1946 and 1951. The Tebhaga movement was a peasant movement in Bengal in 1946 and 1947. The peasants demanded that the share of the harvest that the sharecropping peasants needed to pay to the landowners should be reduced from one half to one third.

the Communist Party of India led to the foundation of AIKS in 1936. AIKS developed out of local peasant organizations and became a countrywide organization of farmers and labourers. This unity between farmers and workers is very important for the self-conception of AIKS (Surjeet 1996).

While all these peasant movements had huge successes, they lost importance in the 1970s, when there was a shift of political power from the big landlords to the so-called "*bullock-capitalists*", the "*small and medium-sized self-employed independent agricultural producers*" (Rudolph and Rudolph 1987, 50), often the beneficiaries of both Green Revolution and land reforms (see sections 1.2 and 1.4, chapter II). These farmers typically started to organize separately and consequently what are known as the 'New Farmers Movements' rapidly gained importance. Some scholars, most prominently Omvedt and Lindberg (Lindberg 1990; Omvedt 1993, 1994), argued that these New Farmers' Movements are 'new' under several perspectives.

The 'new' refers here to the New Social Movement theory (NSM theory). Its proponents argue that, contrary to the old social movements, NSMs are not class–oriented and transcend class–boundaries. The reason is that they do not primarily mobilize around economic issues, but focus on identity and seek to challenge and transform entrenched values and ideas of social justice, personal identities and symbols. They do not aim (in the first place) to increase their influence and power in the political realm, but instead they raise 'social' demands and aim to introduce new lifestyles or transform identities. Importantly, NSM theorists often conceptualize these identities, as well as the grievances, as being constructed rather than given through the social and economic position of a particular group (Buechler 1995; Fuentes and Frank 1989; Shah 2004a). However, the NSM theory is contested. The critics argue that the NSMs possessed no traits that are unique and that they conceal their class interests with 'social' arguments (Buechler 1995; Pichardo 1997). This argumentation of NSM theorists would as a consequence depoliticise the social realm (Dhanagare and John 1988).

Omvedt (1993) based her analysis on the NSM theory, but creates her own definition of New Social Movements. She argued that the New Farmers' Movements were revolutionary in their aspirations and anti-systemic in their impact. With their single-issue agenda of a higher price for agricultural output, they ultimately aimed at social change, because they rejected class politics, ideology, and the leading role of the urban proletariat in class struggles. In the case of the New Farmers' Movements, this means that they are non-class movements fighting for the demands of a united peasantry. They are pictured as multi-caste and multi-class movement without subordinate interests.

This view corresponds closely to the movements' own understanding. Sharad Joshi, a major leader of the New Farmers' Movement in Maharashtra, defined a farmer as anyone associated with agriculture. As mentioned above, the New Farmers' Movements claimed to have a single-issue program: remunerative prices for the agricultural output, namely sugarcane, tobacco, cotton and milk. They emphasized that farmers do not want alms, but a "*reward for their sweat*" (Arora 2001). They therefore demanded an end to the discrimination of the agricultural sector through the state as well as the entire

economic and political system. Prominent leaders of the New Farmers' Movements, namely Sharad Joshi, Charan Singh and Mahendra Singh Tikait, pictured an urban, industrial *India* that exploited rural, agricultural *Bharat* and emphasized to struggle for a united peasantry (see e.g. Omvedt 2005; see section 3.1 and 3.2, chapter II).

Authors like Dhanagare (1995) or Brass (1995) strongly opposed the view that these New Farmers' Movements represented a united peasantry that included the small and marginal farmers and the agricultural labourers. They claimed that the rhetoric about poor farmers (and in some cases environmental issues) only masked rich farmers' interests. Therefore, they argued, these New Farmers Movements were essentially rich farmer movements (for an overview over the debate see Shah 2004a; see chapter VII).

However, even if the 'new' refers back to the NSM theory, 'New Farmers' Movement' has become a rather neutral term for these movements in India in the 1970s and 80s, a term that can be used without assuming that those movements were 'new' in the NSM-sense. I will also use that term to refer to these movements, most often to *Shetkari Sanghatana* in Maharashtra.

Last but not least, I very briefly introduce an additional group of farmer struggles that have become important since the late 1990s: the struggles against land acquisitions for Special Economic Zones (SEZ) or large-scale industrial projects. SEZs are a kind of free trade or manufacturing enclave that became widespread in India in the late 1990s. Mostly located in rural and coastal areas, they were established to attract foreign investments by offering concessions in terms of subsidies, tax exemptions, and derogations from labour laws and export regulations. They have also faced significant resistance from the displaced farmers, fisher folk or pastoralists who saw their livelihood taken away, often with little or no compensation (see e.g. Jenkins, Kennedy, and Mukhopadhyay 2014; Parthasarathy 2015). Ahmed (2012) studied the struggle against the Memorandum of Understanding between the Maharashtra State Electricity Board and Enron in 1992 for the Dabhol Power Project, at that time the largest corporate-led commercial venture in Indian history. He frames these land struggles as "*militant particularism*" that can be understood as a part of the working class' struggles against neoliberalism.

This, however, meets strong criticism regarding the social differences among the people affected by such projects. Vijayabaskar (2010) for example, states that it is the landowners who fight against those projects and cites a member of the legislative assembly who says that "*if agriculture needs to be saved, agricultural labor has to be saved from agriculture*" (ibid, 42).

Such struggles are important even if they are not in the focus of this study. This controversy again shows that these struggles can be understood as fueled either by the suffering of the peasantry, or it can be analyzed in terms of different groups of rural people who are very differently affected by, and have different hopes for, SEZs.

I now come back to the New Farmers' Movements. In India, several organizations belonged to the New Farmers' Movements, namely *Shetkari Sanghatana* in Maharashtra,

Karnataka Rajya Raitha Sangha in Karnataka and the *Bharatiya Kisan Union*[56] in Uttar Pradesh. In the following, I am going to introduce *Shetkari Sanghatana* and particularly shed light on the reasons for its decline since the 1990s.

2.4 Rise and Fall of *Shetkari Sanghatana*[57]

Sharad Joshi started *Shetkari Sanghatana* in the late 1970s, and the movement had its heyday in the late 80s. *Shetkari Sanghatana* emerged in Pune and Nashik and was active in whole Maharashtra, but its strongholds were in Marathwada and Vidarbha, the two most economically backward regions of Maharashtra as depicted in chapter III. Because of the strength of the sugarcane co-operatives, the state's policies had favoured sugarcane over other crops such as cotton, the crops cultivated in Vidarbha and Marathwada. Therefore, *Shetkari Sanghatana* was particularly successful in those areas where sugar co-operatives were not present (Arora 2001).

During that time, the agricultural economy was highly regulated by the state, which fixed the prices and had procurement monopolies in certain fields; in Maharashtra it had the Maharashtra Cotton Monopoly Procurement Scheme (see section 2.1, chapter III). Despite what *Shetkari Sanghatana* called a "one-issue program" focussing on remunerative prices, they have had additional demands such as subsidies for agricultural inputs. Later, Shetkari Sanghatana embraced even more issues related to gender[58], the decentralisation of power and the environment. They have seen themselves in the long tradition of movements like Phule's movement. *Shetkari Sanghatana*'s activism was marked by high flexibility and an ad-hoc nature that used a broad array of agitations. *Shetkari Sanghatana* regularly organized large–scale demonstrations, collective withholdings of crops from reaching the market or refusals to pay bills, as well as small–scale, locally based spontaneous protests[59] (Arora 2001).

The movement was characterized by informal organisation without a concept of membership, and in their opinion, all people working in agriculture were part of the movement. Therefore, a large debate started to assess the class base of the movement (for a short overview see Brass 1995, 9-12). Dhanagare (1990) or Banaji (1995) argued that *Shetkari Sanghatana* was led by the land–owning rural population with a market–oriented production and also reflected their interests; in other words, the New Farmers' Movements mainly represented the agrarian elite. In terms of leadership, Sharad Joshi

[56] Despite the very similar name, this group is not to be confused with the *Bharatiya Kisan Sangh* (see section 3.1 in this chapter).

[57] I base this section on Arora (2001), who has written an extensive overview of the literature on *Shetkari Sanghatana*. In the second part of the section, where I have not given any sources, I rely on my own data.

[58] Some argue that their voluntary action to donate land to their wives also served to bypass the land ceiling laws.

[59] These included *rasta–roko* (blockage of roads or railways to disturb the rural transportation linkages), *bandh* (civic strikes), *chakka jam* (different type of road blockages), *gav bandi* (prevent politicians or officials from entering villages), *kisan panchayat* in cities (farmers occupied public places in cities), and *satyagrahas* and *padyatras* (fasts and foot marches to mobilise farmers, which refer to the protests of Gandhi) (Arora 2001).

was a *Brahmin,* not a *Maratha* and a former civil servant from an urban area. Most of the other leaders were prosperous farmers with medium or large landholdings and from dominant agricultural castes (Arora 2001). As a consequence of representing mostly the agrarian elite, their repertoire of protest activities is often called the "*weapons of the strong*" (see Arora 2001). Other authors on the contrary, most prominently Omvedt (1993), emphasized that *Shetkari Sanghatana* also drew its strength from the support of poorer farmers. Authors like Rudolph and Rudolph (1987) or Lenneberg (1988) then argued that it was the middle farmers that were the base of such movements, what are called "*bullock-capitalists*". This includes those "*cultivators who rely more on family labour and their own human capital than on wage workers and machines*" (Rudolph as cited in Dhanagare 1995, 82).

Shetkari Sanghatana was able to unite thousands of people at its rallies and agitations in the 1970s and 80s. In the 1990s, however, its strength dwindled. There are two main reasons for this development. The first were ideological differences on the New Economic Policies. In the early 1990s, the leaders of *Shetkari Sanghatana* started to disagree on these new policies. The major leader Sharad Joshi was convinced that the New Economic Policies would bring a fair price and consequently wealth to the farmers (Arora 2001). While he advertised the New Economic Policies, other leaders of *Shetkari Sanghatana*. most notably Vijay Jawandhia, disagreed openly. Consequently, Vijay Jawandhia left the movement. He and other activists opposing the New Economic Policies accused Sharad Joshi of betraying the farmers and leading them straight into a trap. Jawandhia feared that the farmers would not know about their leaders' political stands and articulations and hence they would refuse to believe in any farmer leader anymore after this betrayal. According to Jawandhia, this was one reason why it has become difficult to mobilize farmers now. Raju Shetti, an important leader of *Shetkari Sanghatana* in Western Maharashtra, stayed with Joshi and was in line with him ideologically. In 2004, however, he founded his own group, *Svabhimani Shetkari Sanghatana*[60]. These differences in ideology, particularly when it comes to the New Economic Policies, were pointed out most often by higher-level activists who were aware of the movement's history and its political context.

The farmers I interviewed, however, felt that another reason was more important to explain the decline of *Shetkari Sanghatana*, namely the political career of Sharad Joshi. Joshi once promised that he would never join electoral politics, and if he ever did so, his followers should slap him with their *chappels*, their sandals. But then he did and created alliances with many parties in the 1980s. Later he was a member of parliament for his own party, *Swatantra Bharat Paksha*, closely related to the BJP–Sena coalition (Assadi 1995, 217). The fact that he did eventually join politics and break his own promise seemed unforgivable to the farmers. This, many claimed, was the reason they would never trust Joshi again – and indeed why they have difficulties trusting any farmer activist at all.

[60] There is one more faction active in Western Maharashtra under the leadership of Ragunath Patil. He has no relevance in Vidarbha.

There is also a third reason mentioned by a major former activist of *Shetkari Sanghatana* still active in Wardha district. She says that the main reason is that the demands of *Shetkari Sanghatana* were now fulfilled and the prices were determined by the market. Therefore, *Shetkari Sanghatana* had nothing left to fight for. According to the former activist, exponents of *Shetkari Sanghatana* were close to the people in power now and consequently it was no longer necessary to block railways. If they disagree with certain policies, they can simply call the relevant politicians and negotiate. Their remaining demand, such as lower prices for electricity or no load shedding, would not be suitable for these forms of popular protest anyway.

Sharad Joshi and some of the earlier *Shetkari Sanghatana* activists were still active in Vidarbha at the time of this study. However, the movement was far from having the presence it once held in the region. In interviews with Joshi's activists, talking about the past glory of the movement was much more important than current activities. Joshi was still well known among farmers, and if farmers could name any other farmers' activists beside the one that they were supporting, Joshi was among them, and often the only one. But the politically informed farmers who knew more than just his name connected Joshi more with the past than with the present, telling stories about how they had participated in his agitations in younger years or had attended with their parents. So if not in contemporary Vidarbha, *Shetkari Sanghatana* is still very vivid in many peoples' – and particularly interviewees' – memories.

Even if the Sharad Joshi faction of the movement was no longer very active, several of the current major activists and groups stem from this movement. Some of the factions have gained influence, others have become marginal and new groups have emerged agitating around the 'agrarian crisis'. Even if none of these groups could fill in the lacuna, they are active in mobilizing farmers.

3 Mapping Groups and Activists in Vidarbha

A multitude of groups and individual activists mobilise around the issues of 'agrarian crisis' and claim to speak for the farmers. They all call themselves farmer movement groups. In the following, I introduce the groups I selected (see section 3.1, chapter I) with their demands, activities and organizational structures.

3.1 The Movement Groups in Vidarbha

Before I start with a description of the five movement groups that are in the focus of this study, I would like to give an overview in the following table.

Table 8: Overview over the movement groups in Vidarbha, mobilising around the 'agrarian crisis'

	(Main) activists	**Information**
SSS (Svabhimani Shetkari Sanghatana)	Raju Shetti Ravikanth Tupkar Shyam Avthale	Founded out of *Shetkari Sanghatana,* by Raju Shetti Strong in Western Maharashtra; Buldhana district Involved in electoral politics
KAA (Kisan Adikar Abiyan)	Avinash Kakade Suddham Pawar	Founded following Gandhian ideas by Avinash Kakade Strong in Wardha district Has a political and a "*constructive*" leg
VJAS (Vidarbha Jan Andolan Samiti)	Kishor Tiwari Raju Rathod	Founded by Kishor Tiwar Strong in parts of Yavatmal district Strong focus on farmer suicides
BKS (Bharatiya Kisan Sangha)	*No names*	Founded by an RSS thinker in 1979 Strong in other parts of India; mostly Gujarat Part of *sangh parivar*
AIKS (All India Kisan Sabha)	*No names*	Founded in 1936 out of peasant struggles Strong in other parts of Mahrashtra/India; also in Wardha district Part of the Communist Party of India (Marxist)
Major political parties (Congress and BJP)	*No names*	*Kisan Congress* virtually non-existing in Vidarbha Certain leaders of BJP have cooperation with some movement groups
NGOs (none)	*No names*	No NGOs found with political demands that saw themselves (or were seen) as part of a movement
Individual activists (Other activists and journalists)	Vijay Jawandhia Sharad Joshi Palagummi Sainath Jaideep Hardikar Chandrakant Wankhade	Jawandhia and Joshi are (former) activists of *Shetkari Sanghatana* without a base nowadays; Sainath, Hardikar and Wankhade are journalists that are committed to and engage with the same issues around the 'agrarian crisis'

SSS: Farmer Movement with Self Respect

Svabhimani Shetkari Sanghatana (SSS) literally means "farmer movement with self respect" and developed out of Raju Shetti's faction of *Shetkari Sanghatana*. SSS had acquired considerable influence among farmers, particularly among the sugarcane farmers of Western Maharashtra, and Raju Shetti, once a marginal farmer, was a member of parliament in *Lok Sabha* representing a district in Western Maharashtra at the time of this study. After having been so successful in those areas, they are now expanding to Vidarbha, at the moment mainly to the district of Buldhana. The SSS activists said that the reason for the expansion to Vidarbha was the severe 'agrarian crisis' and the farmer suicides. Raju Shetti comes to Buldhana only rarely and another activist, Ravikanth Tupkar, is the main activist for SSS in Vidarbha. He is the son of a farming family from Buldhana married to a successful lawyer who shares his involvement and political activism. Already in his college days, Tupkar had decided to be involved with the farmers' struggles and he has worked for SSS in Vidarbha full–time for more than ten years.

According to Tupkar, SSS does not have memberships. He said that "*membership is not so important. (…) If we call, people will come in lakhs, so there is no time for membership questions.*" Therefore, "*we ask for money and the supporters can just give how much they want".* On the one hand, the funds come from these donations of supporters from Vidarbha, but on the other hand an important part comes from the Western Maharashtra part of the group[61]. According to activists and supporters, the constituencies of SSS were mostly marginal and medium farmers. Tupkar explained that labourers were the most down–trodden people in the rural society, but because SSS's main demands were agriculture-based, labourers were left out from the constituency. SSS's main demand – which was mentioned time and again – is higher prices for agricultural output. They also focus on infrastructural demands (no load shedding, electrical supply during day time and better irrigation facilities), credits, as well as good quality and cheap agricultural inputs (see chapter VI).

SSS is very particular about being a farmer movement group and not a political party. But they do participate in electoral politics and try to gain political influence to reach their goals from within the parliament. Therefore, the organization has two different parts – a *sanghatana* (movement group) and a *paksha* (party). This is a rather difficult balancing act for SSS (see section 2.2, chapter V). However, the agitations of both, the party and the movement group, are very political. SSS' main way of agitation is to conduct demonstrations. They have organised major agitations in Buldhana and Nagpur (during the session of the Legislative Assembly), where they raised their slogans about higher prices for cotton or soybean. In the following, I describe one typical SSS agitation.

[61] It was very difficult to get information about how (or even how much) funds are raised in the groups. When this question was asked, interviewees either replied very reluctantly, not at all or they seemed offended. Therefore, the information about the financial situation of the groups remains scarce.

SSS supporters gathered in a town close to Nagpur. Most of them wore a white shirt, a *Gandhi–topi* with the characters "*I'm a kisan*" as well as red *"Svabhimani Shetkari Sanghatana"*-badges. They stood on the street in front of a small restaurant next to a little truck with banners on it and loudspeakers. Somebody was talking and shouting slogans, while songs blared out of the loudspeakers. Tupkar was discussing with other activists about how to organize the agitations. The plan was to block the road (*rasta rokko*). Before the agitation started, one man announced on the speaker that "*our agitation is fully dependent on non–violence, so all kisans should keep quiet. (…) We will not injure any one or will not damage any public as well as private property. We will block the roads from all sides*." All farmers started shouting the slogan *"who said that we will not succeed? We will demand for it until we get it*". Tupkar was standing at the speakers trying to motivate the supporters. He shouted that "*in the past, the Indians had fought against the British for freedom and the freedom fighters went to the jail. This is the time for us now to go to jail for freedom and justice for the kisans. We will never step back*." He went further, saying that if the farmers wanted a fair price for their crops, they needed to join Raju Shetti. For this purpose, he argued, they had to remove their caste identity, religious identity as well as their class identity and come together on one platform. Shortly after that speech, policemen tried to arrest Tupkar and the whole group of activists ran away quickly. Soon after, the demonstration dissolved.

Picture 5: Agitation of SSS as described above

Demonstrations of this size are a rare thing for the organisation, but Tupkar constantly travels through villages of Buldhana to hold public meetings. He claimed that a typical day for him involved going to villages and talking to farmers. On other days, he would talk to his "*journalist friends*" or government officials. He would discuss with the latter or threaten them if necessary. Tupkar is Shetti's right hand and has the ambition to have a political career himself. In his newly built house, for example, he wanted to have an office and a visitors' room to welcome guests and listen to their issues.

While Tupkar is the main SSS activist for the region of Vidarbha, there are several lower level activists who are active mostly in their respective villages or are heads of other SSS sub-units, such as the student wing. In village SSS, Shyam Avthale, a young man, is the main activist. He is responsible for activities and supporters in the village and he is also standing for the district level *zilla parishad* elections. He supported Tupkar during elections. Besides holding meetings in village SSS, Avthale often follows Tupkar for other meetings.

SSS strongly spoke against the ruling Congress party. According to Tupkar, their goal was to get the Congress out of power, even if this made alliances with communalist forces necessary. The next group, on the contrary, had a very different approach to the ruling Congress and was entangled with it.

KAA: Farmers' Rights Group

Kisan Adikar Abiyan (KAA, literally 'farmer's rights group') was started by Avinash Kakade in 1995. At first, he was not involved in agriculture, as he had completed his diploma in engineering. He then became fascinated with Gandhi and came to agriculture through his interest in the farmer suicides as well as his agricultural work in a Gandhian Ashram. This, in his own words, was the turning point of his life and he decided to "*live a life in hardworking*". So he had started KAA to "*tackle the roots of the problem*", namely to change the *"awareness of kisans"*. KAA is a young, geographically limited but well–connected group. Their villages, activists and activities are all located around Wardha.

The group does not have a formal hierarchical structure, but the activists take decisions together. Kakade and the other activists meet each other frequently to discuss what issues to tackle next. Kakade said that anyone could become an activist if he was ready to get involved in the group and was known and recommended by another activist. However, Kakade still plays a very important role. One supporter told that "*Kakade is taking the decisions (…). But if there is any important decision than all activists will come*". Also Kakade himself emphasized the importance of hearing the opinions of activists as well as possible supporters. The local activist of village KAA, Suddham Pawar, explained that

> *"we take all activists' opinions on the subject of our agitations. We arrange meetings in villages where our activists are active (…). We review our work, to discuss the annual plan and monthly plans with kisans. (…) Later we are making a list of the problems, and make pamphlets. Through newspapers and pamphlets we are trying to inform a larger number of kisans."*

According to their own figures, KAA has around 3,000 supporters, mainly medium and small farmers as well as some marginal ones. The membership fee is Rs 10 for one year and another Rs 10 for the group's badge. Kakade explained that it didn't matter if somebody is a member or not, and that the group kept no membership records. If anyone went to one of KAA's agitations, they generally contributed a sum of Rs 50 or whatever amount they wanted. Kakade emphasized that *"some contribution should be*

from their [supporters] own side only. We do this kind of agitations only two or three times in a year".

The group demands first and foremost a higher minimum support price for crops. Second, they want various infrastructural improvements such as irrigation facilities and a better power supply, fences against the ravages of wild animals, provision of proper pesticides and seeds, extension services, and roads. The third issue is that the government should provide loans to farmers. A fourth set of demands is that the government should treat farmers fairly. They criticised the criteria for obtaining compensation in case of drought/excess rain or suicide, which according to them were not fair and did not allow the money to reach the farmers, e.g. because of problems with their '7/12–extracts'[62].

Corresponding to this broad range of demands, KAA also has a broad variety of agitations that go far beyond rallies and roadblocks. Kakade as well as Pawar emphasised strongly that KAA "*walks on two legs*". This meant that they have political as well as "*constructive*" activities. I will first describe the political ones, where KAA addresses its general demands at various government officials – often called "*ask a question to the Minister*". In one occasion, KAA had calculated the expenditure and income for soybean, sorghum and cotton. Based on these numbers, they sent a request letter to the State Minister of Agriculture.

There have been several small agitations, where at the end KAA handed over a letter with demands to the District Collector. In one of them, about fifty supporters started gathering at the roadside in Wardha, close to a small teashop. They sat on the floor, a banner with their main demands hanging next to them. Kakade, Pawar and a few supporters held speeches and talked about their problems with prices, traders and compensations. Then, chanting and chatting, the whole group started marching on the road towards the Block Development Office. Kakade and Pawar had prepared a letter with their most important demands to be given to the District Collector. When they reached the block development office, a couple of journalists were already waiting for them. Pawar and Kakade said that the district officer should come out and listen to them. If he did not talk to them, they threatened to lock him in his office. The district officer was ready to talk to Pawar, Kakade and some supporters and accepted their letter of demands. He promised to hand over the letter to the agricultural Minister of Maharashtra.

[62] The 7/12-extract is an extract from the land register maintained by the revenue department of the Government of Maharashtra. It gives basic information about the plot of land, the name of the owner and its cultivator as well as the records of loans extended to the landowner or cultivator given by the government agencies. In rural areas the ownership of a particular plot of land can be established on the basis of the 7/12-extract.

Picture 6: Agitation of KAA described above

Pawar narrated what they did in another agitation, when the officer did not want to talk to them:

> *"We went to the District Collector office, about six or seven kisans for five days. We stayed in their offices and we slept there also. (...) But we cleaned everything, we were very friendly. We have tried to win the hearts of the people. In the beginning they did not like us, but in the end they did not want us to leave. Our demand was that we get a written certificate of the Chief Minister [CM], that they will give us the MSP. The Minister of agriculture said 'ok, I ask the CM'. So the CM signed urgently and he faxed it to the District Collector office. So we left and it was a success."*

For KAA, as Kakade emphasised, it was very important to concentrate their agitations on these issues with the largest chances of success. The issues, according to them, should be close to people's problems, feasible, and the corresponding agitation must happen at the right place. According to Kakade's own words, he decided strategically who to invite for which agitation in order not to make supporters tired of agitations. He argued that "*kisans should walk only a few times per year [on the road]. If we have a discussion with the District Collector, then why would we need 100 people? There is only a need of two or five people. This is sufficient for the discussion*."

The argument above leads to the "*second leg*" of the activities of the group: the constructive work, which consists mainly of three activities. First, KAA is very closely connected to a shop for organic farm products in Wardha. A group of farmers active in the Gandhian Ashram nearby began selling organic products. The shop has grown over the years and is now in a large room in the centre of Wardha. They sell *khadi* (cotton) clothes, natural cosmetics, spices, mostly processed food as well as few fresh vegetables. In the backyard there is a restaurant where they sell *zunka bhakri* during lunch, a traditional meal of sorghum *chapatis*, lentils and onions. This restaurant is a meeting place for many activists and journalists when they are in Wardha. Besides the promotion of organic production and consumption, the idea is also that *"the kisans have*

their own market, they can decide their prices, through this also the farming can be profitable", as one farmer working in the shop explained. Kakade was part of the group of farmers that founded the shop. Later, he decided that he wanted to go more towards political agitations and mobilization. But the idea of "*constructive programs*" is still very important for KAA, as the following quote from Kakade illustrates.

> *"Without constructive programs we cannot have success in our movement group. For a struggle you need a constructive program (…). Through this only the change will come, but slowly, slowly. (…) Kisans are working hard in the field, but they don't get a good price. (…) To come on the road doesn't make a movement group."*

As a second constructive activity, KAA organizes trainings for farmers about how organic farming works and how it can help the farmers to "*get back some independence*" by producing their own inputs. In general, as both Pawar and Kakade emphasized, farmer awareness is crucial. They deem it important to distribute the results of their discussions as well as information about government schemes or new technologies among the farmers through the activists. In the eyes of the activists, this should actually be done by the *gram panchayats*, but they were mostly found to be unwilling to fulfil this role and therefore KAA was taking over the task of building awareness.

The third constructive activity was the "*Root Milk"* project that was set up in 2013. A KAA supporter, a Wardha-based economist working as a consultant for the World Bank, explained to me that milk production was too low in Vidarbha. This was surprising, considering the importance that livestock and diary production held for the livelihood of farmers. The reason was, he argued, that the government had neglected diary production and therefore the price was very low. So Kakade together with a local journalist, the aforementioned economist as well as a few investors from Wardha and Nagpur decided to found the "*Root Milk Company*". The idea was that the company would pay a higher milk price to the farmers and guarantee a high quality of milk for consumers in nearby towns willing to pay a premium. In 2015, however, this project proved to be a failure. The economist held that the "*the kisans killed it*", because they cheated with the quality of milk they delivered. There are plans to start it anew, but on a much smaller basis.

VJAS: Vidarbha People's Movement Committee

Vidarbha Jan Andolan Samiti (VJAS, literally 'Vidarbha People's Movement Committee') is probably the most prominent group, particularly among people outside Vidarbha. VJAS even claimed to be the only advocacy group taking up the issues of farmer suicides in Vidarbha. The leader, Kishor Tiwari, explained that they were "*working on the ground, but close to the world*". Virtually every journalist from different (international) media reporting about farmer suicides in Vidarbha has spoken to Tiwari.

Tiwari emphasized that in VJAS, the farmers and labourers were the activists, not "*the students and scientists*". VJAS has a main office in Yavatmal district (see figure 2). Concerning their funds, Tiwari assured that they received no funds from foreign or government bodies, but only from their supporters and other private donors, for

example Tiwari's own family. Tiwari, a businessman from Nagpur, founded VJAS in 1997. He estimated that their constituency was 10,000 farmers, mainly in Yavatmal, however, like other groups VJAS did not have formal memberships. The main constituencies, he maintained, were dry land, debt–trapped farmers belonging to the category of Scheduled Tribes. The local activist of village VJAS, Rajesh Rathod, argued that VJAS was also fighting for labour. But others – also labourers themselves – asserted that nobody fought for labour.

While Tiwari is the main leader of the group, Mohan Jadav is also an important activist in Yavatmal. Further, there is a main activist in each village where VJAS is active. In village VJAS, the village activist Rajesh Rathod was also the *sarpanch* at the time of the study. But when there is an agitation, he spends all his time working for VJAS. Farmers are informed of VJAS activities through pamphlets printed by Tiwari or by the village level activists. About twice a month, the activists from all the villages come together and discuss future demands and activities. Tiwari's role as the leader is nevertheless immensely important in this group. This is also expressed in the answer of one activist to the question why they were asking for higher prices: "*our Tiwari is demanding this, so we are also demanding this*".

Compared to the previous groups, the focus of VJAS is more diverse and not restricted to higher prices. The important demands besides prices for cotton were irrigation facilities as well as a loan waiver scheme that should apply to people who borrowed from self–help–groups. VJAS focuses especially on activities related to farmer suicides. Therefore, activists as well as villagers considered support for families of farmers who committed suicides as one of VJAS' major activities. VJAS also demands a pension scheme for farmers as well as for widows in particular. Another related topic is banning alcohol, an issue brought up mainly by women. Last but not least, the more general demands include better infrastructural facilities such as roads, the development of small–scale industries and employment opportunities, health facilities, education in rural areas, better distribution of grain under the PDS-scheme and better salaries for labourers.

The group has four principal means of agitation. According to Tiwari and Jadav, the main one involves approaching the High Court of Maharashtra (at state level). They fight in front of the Human Rights Commission or in front of the Supreme Court to approach lawmakers and regulatory bodies. They have brought more than hundred public interest litigations before the High Court, according to their own information. As an example, Rathod pointed out how Tiwari fought for people to get food from the PDS. The village was in what is known as a tribal area and people were dying of starvation in nearby villages. Rathod complained that the poorest of the poor were supposed to get wheat and rice at a cheaper rate, but that food never reached them. Consequently, Tiwari filed a case in the High Court "*because people were dying*". VJAS was successful and the government started a survey on the food situation in this region. As another example, one supporter mentioned a scheme run by the Integrated Rural Development Program that failed to deliver the promised loans to families below the poverty line. He said that

VJAS "*had taken initiative in this issue, due to which around 150 families got a loan of 25,000 Rs*."

Second, VJAS performs charitable activities, mostly for widows of farmers who committed suicide. According to the village activist Rathod as well as Jadav, these charitable activities included financing a school for "*daughters of kisans*" to learn IT skills. VJAS also supports local initiatives such as the ban on alcohol in village VJAS. Some women of the village established a ban independently from VJAS. But to keep it up, Tiwari organized cultural programs with songs and dramas to make people aware about the dangers of alcohol, as Rathod reported.

Third, VJAS actively uses media channels, from interviews in newspapers and TV to social media and blogs, to raise the awareness about the situation in Vidarbha and to enhance their publicity. However, it is the agitations and charitable activities that were better known among lower level activists and supporters.

The fourth means of action is the organization of demonstrations and agitations such as roadblocks and giving demand letters to the District Collector. VJAS also tries to reach influential politicians with their agitations in order to make them aware of the situation of farmers in Vidarbha. In 2007, then Prime Minister of India, Manmohan Singh, planned to visit a village near village VJAS. VJAS wanted to make the Prime Minister meet suicide-affected families. At the last minute, the visit was cancelled, officially because of heavy rains, but the activists suspected that it actually was because Maharashtra's Chief Minister was afraid that Tiwari would state some "*ugly facts*". In the end, the village activist Rathod told me, Singh came to a neighbouring village, but people who were not residents of that village were not allowed to participate. Compared to other groups, these political agitations against the government were not central to VJAS. Few farmers had ever participated in such an agitation and even the activists did not emphasize them much. Direct support for certain farmers or labourers was much more in focus.

BKS: India's Farmer Association

The *Bharatiya Kisan Sangha* (BKS, literally 'India's farmer association') was founded in 1979 by an RSS thinker and is an organization of *sangh parivar*. The *sangh parivar* (literally the 'family of organisations') consists of organizations promoting Hindutva and seeking to increase the predominance of Hinduism in India in terms of its social, political and cultural presence. Among its leading organisations are the BJP, the *Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh* (RSS) as well as Shiv Sena (Assadi 1995; Gupta 1997; Omvedt 1993). Members and activists of BKS very often mention that BKS was closely cooperating with RSS, that "*RSS and the shakhas*[63] *are our base*". The BKS also works in close cooperation with the BJP. One member said that *"we work together with our whole group, you know, this BJP, then RSS and Bajrang Dal*[64]*"*. Many activists of BKS are at the same time active in RSS, BJP or *Shiv Sena*. But according to them, BKS was not a political

[63] Shakha refers to the daily meetings of the *Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh* (RSS) and includes sports and prayers.

[64] A Hindu right–wing youth organization belonging to the *sangh parivar*.

party and had no electoral activities. Their finances come from a yearly membership fee of Rs 10 and donations. They are recognized as a charitable trust.

BKS is organized at a national level. Their organization is hierarchical and has national level, state level, district level, block level as well as village level committees. The supporters who had participated in BKS agitations spoke about agitations that took place in Nagpur to demand for better prices, compensation payments and better infrastructure. But most agitations that people talked about were in Delhi or even other states, mostly Gujarat. Rather than agitations organized by BKS, supporters often mentioned that they would now participate in agitations of BJP or *Shiv Sena*. So the presence and activity of BKS in Maharashtra, including Vidarbha, is low compared to other states and to the other movement groups of this study.

Activists did mention that they had organized marches and participated in agitations to hand over letters of demands to the District Collectors in nearby villages together with 200–300 other activists present. Another important part of their activities, so the activists emphasized, was trainings for "*traditional agriculture*" to increase farmer awareness. According to a main activist, they were not in favour of roadblocks because *"these are distractive activities. (...) In a village, there is a poor kisan, doesn't have seeds. We support him. That is the base of our activities. This gives us respect in the villages"*. In contrary, the only agitations in village BKS that some supporters mentioned was a roadblock to demand for higher prices, better electrical supply and 7/12–extracts.

However, among the interviewed supporters, very few mentioned that they had participated or even heard of any agitations recently. Also the village activist mentioned that it was in the 1990s when BKS in village BKS was active, organizing agitations and giving demand letters to District Collectors. Nevertheless, activists maintained that there were regular meetings of activists on different levels. In village BKS, however, the village activist was the only one talking about regular meetings. One member said that in this village *"the current body members they are not really interested in arranging the program and meeting for the kisans"*.

Congruently, in the program that I attended, the majority of people participating and organising were activists from other places, mostly Gujarat. It took place in a college a few kilometres away from Nagpur. About thirty people were present; all but one were elderly men above fifty years old. The chairman and the board sat in the front of the crowd, opposite the others in a row. They discussed about how to get more members and brought up the idea that each member should find at least two new members. Later, the chairman lectured on the new farming methods that BKS should take up as an organisational tool as well as on the importance of the cow in agriculture.

In this line, BKS activists claimed often that their main aim was the *"welfare of the kisans"*. One is that farmers should go back to "*traditional agriculture*" using local seeds as well as natural products for their production. Cow dung in particular was praised often for its quality as a fertilizer as well as a pesticide. BKS activists further wanted to fight against the "*killing of the cows*" to improve the situation in Vidarbha.

AIKS: All India Farmers Committee[65]

I have already introduced AIKS in section 2.3 above. Compared to the other groups, AIKS is an old organization; it was the major one among the left-wing 'old' peasant movements. The organisation has fought against the exploitation of peasants, against landlordism and for land reforms. AIKS has been critical of the New Agricultural Strategies and it has argued that the goal of those policies was not to abolish landlordism but only to turn feudal into capitalist land relations. When the New Farmers' Movements grew bigger, AIKS joined several agitations with them. They shared the demand of a remunerative price for agricultural produce. However, they remain critical of the New Farmers' Movements, which, according to them, effectively fought for the interests of rich farmers (Surjeet 1996).

AIKS and the left-wing movement in general have never managed to expand significantly in Maharashtra compared to other Indian states. Nevertheless, there are regions within Maharashtra where AIKS is quite successful (i.e. Nashik and Thane). In Vidarbha, AIKS was introduced in 1956 and its influence remains modest. An activist from a city in Vidarbha said that AIKS did not have considerable presence on the ground in Vidarbha. Only in Wardha district, there are some activists and AIKS is present. According to their own information, AIKS had over 200,000 members in Maharashtra (Wynistorf 2012).

In Wardha, where AIKS is strongest, the group has about 7,000 members and about thirty higher-level activists. In villages AIKS, there are about 50 active and around 100 passive members who do not come to agitations but who pay the membership fee. The membership fee is Rs 5 and the village level activist emphasized that AIKS did not take donations from persons such as traders. This village activist is also the *sarpanch* of villages AIKS and AIKS had a majority in the *gram panchayat* at the time of the study. The activists reported that AIKS was very strong in this village compared to other villages in Vidarbha. Still, they are losing members and mobilization has become more difficult. One reason, the activist argued, was that many farmers had changed their occupation and left agriculture. Consequently, only about half of the supporters of AIKS are still farmers. The others have another occupation but still support the group (Wynistorf 2012).

AIKS holds many meetings for supporters and activists. First, these meetings serve to establish and maintain a connection between the group and possible supporters and members. Second, it is important for AIKS to connect with the other levels of the organization as well as the other wings of CPI(M). Third, these meetings and seminars aim at educating and "*awakening*" the farmers. Activists emphasized often that education and training of farmers were among the most important activities of AIKS. There are about six meetings per year at a district level as well as about four per year at the village level. At these meetings they discuss which issues to take up or how to

[65] As mentioned in section 3.1 chapter I, this description relies mostly on the Masters thesis of Andrea Wynistorf (Wynistorf 2012).

increase their constituency. From time to time, activists hold speeches, e.g. in the village temple, and about 200 people typically come to listen (Wynistorf 2012, own data).

Besides these meetings and workshops, AIKS also organizes rallies and demonstration or brings AIKS' demands to the office of the District Collector. A village level activist said that AIKS would first organize agitations for prices on the block level, then on the district level and if they remained unsuccessful they would conduct an agitation at the state level. For being part of CPI(M), elections are also an important and frequent activity for AIKS. As one activist emphasized, direct action was also very important. Without that, the activist argued, change could never be achieved in India. The activist gave an example where the black market for inputs was flourishing and traders asked for horrendous prices. AIKS threatened the government that it should either provide the farmers with inputs from their storage or AIKS would break into their storage places to take inputs.

Their most important issues are better prices for agricultural output as well as an improvement of the public services, namely irrigation facilities, no load shedding as well as a better infrastructure in general. Further, they demand a secure and cheap public provision of inputs, available loans with low interest rates and improved extension services to make technological advances in agriculture available for the farmers (Wynistorf 2012, own data). In contrast to the other groups, land is an issue, even if a rare one. The village activist has demanded land reforms to benefit the small and marginal farmers.

To conclude, the different movement groups differ in their size and in whether or not they are part of a larger, national organisation. But in Vidarbha itself, the geographical reach of all the groups is very limited. They are strong in those villages where they have a strong activist. Typically they are not even known by farmers a few villages away. As mentioned in section 3.1, chapter I, I have chosen those villages for this study, where one particular movement group was active and strong. The other movement groups were typically hardly known by supporters, or not known at all. Therefore, I analyse one movement group per village. Situation of competition, therefore, do not occur between the different movement groups but rather between these groups and the big political parties.

3.2 Other Involved Actors[66]

Apart from those five movement groups, there are also other actors involved in the movement around the 'agrarian crisis' in Vidarbha. This section compiles those actors – activists, politicians and journalists – who have been mentioned by the movement actors themselves, those that seemed most important to the movement groups.

[66] In contrast to the groups described before, I base the description of the farmer wings of the two major political parties as well as NGOs on a few interviews with leaders and activists without having interviewed followers or beneficiaries.

Major Political Parties

In the context the political struggles of the five movement groups, there are clearly two party coalitions that came up as the most important ones: Congress–NCP and BJP–Sena. Among those, BJP in particular was perceived by activists as well as supporters of other groups to be an important player. Congress (and to a lesser extent NCP) were also mentioned often, but rather as opponents than as allies, because they ruled the state at the time of the study (see 2.1, this chapter).

The search for a representative of the *Kisan Congress,* the farmer wing of the Congress was in vain. I did not hear about an agitation for farmers organized by Congress, nor did I come across any leaders. I did find a veteran activist, but trying to talk to any present day politician involved with farmer issues turned out to be impossible. While I had mobile numbers, scheduling even the shortest of interviews was denied. Therefore, I called a sympathizer of KAA, a well-educated influential man who it was said was close to Congress. He agreed and said that "*we [himself and other KAA activists] are Congress men, but we don't belong to Congress*". He explained that they believed in the ideology of Congress and would like to get involved in the party. But the structure, particularly on the local level, was so "*crooked*", that it was literally impossible for people from the wrong caste, class and without the right connections to become active in Congress. He was convinced that the local Congress leaders were so corrupt and incompetent that even if I did manage to talk to them, they were incapable of giving any information. In Vidarbha, he concluded, there were no leaders of Congress or *Kisan Congress* who raised their voice for farmer issues.

In contrast to the invisibility of Congress activism, BJP is very visible. Many interviewees mentioned that they had taken part in BJP agitations or had at least heard of some organisational activity. I was able to talk to a major BJP leader in Vidarbha who was particularly involved in farmer issues. BJP, as the major opposition party at the time of the study, raised the same demands for higher MSPs and cheaper input costs, more regional equality in the distribution of state resources, irrigation systems, loans at low interest and insurances. There were, the BJP activist argued, already many schemes, but they were not working because of the corruption of politicians and officials. He claimed that "*people with integrity*" needed to come to power to solve these problems. Therefore, he said, they organized both trainings for the farmers and rallies, at times violent ones. He confirmed that BJP organised frequent agitations and had become increasingly important in Vidarbha villages (see also 2.1, this chapter).

Non-Governmental Organizations

Besides the political parties, the interviewees also mentioned a few NGOs active in Vidarbha. But when I talked to them, it turned out that among all the NGOs I encountered, none of them raises political demands or organizes political activities. There are no NGOs that have significance for the interviewees apart from the organisation of the globally well-known activist Vandana Shiva, *Navdanya*. But even Shiva's organisation was hardly involved in what interviewees considered political farmer struggles, although it certainly helped them establish seed banks.

Additionally, many activists were critical of NGOs. Tiwari of VJAS radically criticised NGOs arguing that "*they do it only for the show. They have the same arguments [than me], but don't reach the conclusions.*" And Jawandhia, another activist (see below), said that he was willing to cooperate with NGOs but only with *"those who have the same views on economical policy or who have some political views at all."*

Individual Activists

Last but not least, there are individual activists who play a crucial role within these mobilizations. Some of them belong to a particular group and others do not. But they were all linked to activists of different groups, stand with the latter and engage in the same struggles.

Probably the most influential and important individual activist is Vijay Jawandhia. He was the first leader to leave *Shetkari Sanghatana* after Joshi had decided to support the New Economic Policies. Jawandhia still considered himself leader of *Shetkari Sanghatana*. Because there was neither a formal, hierarchical structure nor a formal membership, *Shetkari Sanghatana* simply means movement of farmers. Jawandhia still feels a part of that, even if he no longer gas a support base in the class of farmers who once supported him, as he himself admitted. Anyway, as he said, he is an old man now and he doesn't want to lead agitations anymore. But he still has many contacts to other activists in different parts of India and even abroad, whom he meets sometimes. He still gives lectures on the situation of agriculture at universities as well as interviews in newspapers. According to other activists, he did still have an important role for them as a mentor and advisor. He was, as a journalist put it, "*the only sane voice*".

Sharad Joshi, on the contrary, is quite important as a farmer leader in people's memories. He is still the person known by the largest number of farmers. As mentioned above, at least a section of supporters belonging to all of the groups reported to have been part of his agitations or remember their fathers or relatives being part of the *Sanghatana*. Sharad Joshi, for many, is a "*kisan leader*" who had turned into a "*politician*" and had lost the trust of the farmers by doing so. Nevertheless, many supporters saw the contemporary groups as a continuation of the struggles of *Shetkari Sanghatana*. One supporter of KAA said that *"Shetkari Sanghatana is old and KAA is new, but the demand is the same."*

Besides Joshi and Jawandhia, who are dinosaurs of *Shetkari Sanghatana*, interviewees also mentioned other leaders who they perceived to be fighting for farmer issues. One is Raju Shetti, the leader of SSS introduced above. Some interviewees knew him through television and were impressed about *"what he has done for kisans in Western Maharashtra"*. Others mentioned Sadabhau Khot, another activist of SSS, or – very prominently – Pasha Patel. The latter was also once part of *Shetkari Sanghatana* and later joined the NCP before he defected to the BJP (Indian Express 2000; Takle 2012). During the time of the study, Patel led a "*kisan march*" from Latur in Marathwada (Patel's stronghold) to Nagpur in Vidarbha. He took up the issues of MSP and rain-fed agriculture and got supported by farmers from very different political backgrounds

(Takle 2012, own data). Despite Patel's association with the BJP, interviewees referred to him as a "*kisan leader*" rather than as a BJP politician.[67]

Apart from these activists and politicians, there were several journalists who have committed themselves to the *"cause of the kisans*", as one of them has put it. The most prominent among them is Palagummi Sainath. He is a renowned journalist reporting on rural issues who has written often about farmer suicides. Not so much among ordinary farmers, but to a great extent among activists, Sainath is an important figure. Jaideep Hardikar, a close confidant of Sainath, lives in Nagpur and focuses on similar issues. He is well known and active in Vidarbha and works with many farmer groups. Activists of all groups know him and talk about him sympathetically. In particular, he is closely connected both with KAA as well as VJAS and he has provided them with support and advice. Another journalist who is important in the discussion about farmer suicides in Vidarbha is Chandrakant Wankhade, who has written a book about the farmer suicides in Vidarbha (Wankhade 2010).

3.3 Cooperation among Movement Groups and Activists

Cooperation and joint activities

The activists of the different groups know each other well and most of the groups have some basic cooperation with each other. They sometimes meet to discuss basic issues. An activist of KAA told that *"last year we started a communication with them [other activists] such as Tiwari, Prakash Pohare*[68]*, Svabhimani Shetkari Sanghatana. We sat together and talked with each other. We will come to a common opinion, then we will come together."* In Wardha, where KAA and Jawandhia are based, there are occasional meetings to discuss the problems of farmers in Vidarbha. One supporter of KAA said that he participated in one recently: *"It was for three days. Vijay Jawandhia and some other activists were there. Only the strong activists and kisans of KAA came."* According to their own information, they invited everybody who was interested and therefore, some activists from AIKS and *Shetkari Sanghatana* as well as Tiwari came.

Further, several activists said that the individual activists were important for the cooperation between the groups because they knew about the different on-going activities and were in contact with different activists as well as outsiders who could increase publicity of an activity or provide finances.

Generally, cooperation happens mostly at the level of such discussions and meetings. When it comes to agitations, there is hardly any cooperation between the groups. One example of this is that when the winter session of the state's parliament opened in Vidarbha's capital Nagpur, all the groups conducted separate agitations. Nevertheless,

[67] Interviewees hardly ever mentioned names of activists that were not at all connected to *Shetkari Sanghatana*. The only one that was mentioned sometimes was Bachchu Kadu. Kadu is an MLA who has founded the *Prahar Yuvashakti Sanghatana* and often takes up farmers' issues and in particular farmer suicides.

[68] Prakash Pohare is the editor of a Marathi newspaper in Vidarbha and was mentioned by some interviewees.

cooperation is an important issue in many interviews and the interviewees often reflected on the reasons that have made cooperation so difficult.

Difficulties in Cooperation

According to the interviewed activists as well as supporters, cooperation was difficult for three major reasons. First, activists often mentioned the limited geographical reach of their groups as the main reason why the cooperation was not closer. KAA activists emphasized that they were interested in cooperating with other groups. But, as their leader Kakade said, "*in Wardha KAA is basically the only movement group for kisans. I can say that other kisans' movement groups are very rare. Actually it is very sad. I feel that kisans can go in any movement group. But they should go, they should not stay alone."* He assured that they had good relationships with SSS, for example, but that they were active in different geographical areas.

The second reason is that the ideologies of the groups differed. Even if their demands are surprisingly similar, the groups have very distinct ideologies, especially outside the area of agriculture. To take again the cooperation of KAA and SSS as an example, Kakade explained that

> *"unfortunately they [SSS] are doing violent rallies. But I believe in non-violence. (…) When they are in our rally, they should not react violently [when police beats them], otherwise it will be quite difficult to bring success to the movement group."*

Many activists of KAA and SSS asserted that it was impossible for them to cooperate with the Hindu-nationalist forces or with activists close to them. But activists often pointed out that making such decisions was difficult. This can be exemplified by SSS's cooperation with different groups. SSS sometimes supported BJP, but also cooperated with AIKS as well as the Peasants and Workers Party (*Shetkari Khamgar Paksha*), both distinctly leftist parties. When I asked an AIKS activist why they would agree with such a cooperation, he said what the SSS activist had told me as well: *"they [SSS] are the only sane people around"*.

The cooperation of SSS with BJP is full of problems. They closely cooperate on a state level, but on a local level the cooperation is limited to single agitations. The leader Tupkar said that he did not like the ideology of BJP. But

> *"the reason we cooperate with BJP or Shiv Sena is only that they are against Congress. We really need to change the Congress government and there should be a broad alliance with all other parties against Congress. So we will not cooperate with BJP alone, but only if there is a broad alliance of Anti-Congress. I am against all their Hindutva ideology. But we have no choice."*

Apart from these ideological issues in cooperation, there are also very concrete local issues that hinder cooperation between SSS and BJP. There was a scandal over a district's co-operative bank that has been shut down (for details see section 2.3, chapter V). Tupkar from SSS believed that this was the fault of high-ranking politicians and

political leaders from big parties. SSS organised agitations in the streets of the district capital, publicly disclosing the names of the politicians at fault, including BJP politicians. Tupkar reported that "*for example now in this bank issue, I have attacked them [politicians of Congress and BJP] and they threatened me also. So I can never cooperate with them again.*" Obviously, such agitations make cooperation on a local level very difficult. Even if he added later that "*if the state level authorities [of SSS] decide that a cooperation should be there, we have to follow."*

This points to the third reason that makes cooperation difficult, namely differences and distrust between the different activists. To take the example of VJAS's leader Tiwari, he assured that he wanted cooperation with everybody and *"if a common platform is there and we are invited, we will always go. But the others do not invite us"*. He said that he was in contact with many leaders of other groups, but he also criticised them a lot, arguing that they were "*media people. They are only interested in media and in giving lectures and make no meetings with kisans."* While Tiwari was strongest in his criticism of others, a number of activists had a common complaint against other groups of activists, namely that they were only "*interested in politics*".

Considering all this – cooperation but also difficulties therein, the similarities in demands, but also the differences in terms of geographical area of work, ideology as well as political rivalries – the question remains whether the different activists and supporters themselves perceive the multitude of groups as belonging together, as one 'movement' that engages with the 'agrarian crisis'.

Emic Understanding as a 'Movement'

The interviewed activists and supporters used the word 'movement' or 'movement group' for their particular group and not for the multitude of groups. But in several statements, it becomes clear that they saw themselves as being part of a greater group of activists that all fight for the same. Many activists, for example, emphasized that I could *"ask any activist in Vidarbha, they will all tell you the same about the situation of the kisans"*, and they really did to some extent; the differences in terms of agricultural demands were small at the concrete level. Tiwari of VJAS – despite all his criticisms of other activists – said that there were many activists fighting for farmer issues. He said that

> *"for example Jawandhia is there. Shetkari Sanghatana is there. The small, small activists throughout Vidarbha are there. I'm also one of them, a small, small, smallest of one, working in one remote place of Maharashtra."*

As could be seen above, these activists and groups are active locally in the villages where they have strong activists. While the leaders know each other, the supporters know only those groups active in their respective village. Farmers from neighbouring villages have often not even heard of the group. Most interviewees in the villages did not know any other groups when asked. Those who did mostly said that they saw little difference in these groups' demands or activities and that all these different groups or activists were doing good work. Sometimes they said that the group they were following was the only

honest one while the others were only "*political*". But they mostly argued that it would "*not matter under which banner we are marching, as long as it is about prices*", as a supporter of SSS claimed. A supporter of KAA got to the point that "*each group wants to maintain its self-image among the kisans. But for normal kisan the dream is only prices (…). Those [kisans] who are interested, they are also coming, not only under one banner – whoever is calling, we are going there.*"

4 Concluding Thoughts: One 'Movement'?

Can we, thus, talk of a broader 'movement' in Vidarbha that addresses issues of the 'agrarian crisis', or do we find isolated attempts by individual groups only? To discuss this question, I come back to the definitions and concepts that I introduced in section 1 of this chapter.

A possible entry point into this discussion is Sheth's (2004) notion of 'micro-movements' (see section 1.2, chapter IV). Micro-movement refers to groups that are not linked to macro structures of power and ideology, but rather expand horizontally through several micro-movements. However, Sheth gave only a vague definition of micro-movements. In order to explain the feasibility of this notion in the case of Vidarbha, I argue that there are four characteristics that are important in such micro-movements. First, Sheth said that micro-movements are not linked vertically to the macro structures of power and ideology. This criterion only partially holds for the groups that are part of this study. All the groups have links to macro structures of power and ideology in the form of political parties. For KAA, SSS and VJAS these links were weaker and less formalized and they recognized each other as being farmer 'movement' groups at least to some extent. BKS on the contrary has stronger links with established parties (namely BJP) and was considered too communalist to work with. AIKS is officially part of a national political party. The distinction between being linked to those "*vertical structures of power*" or not is also difficult to establish because these links can have various forms and intensities. But the associated question of belonging to the powerful proved to be an important argument in the mobilization process of the groups, as I will analyse in chapter V.

Sahoo (2014) added the second characteristic at another level to the meaning of micro-movements. 'Movement' groups should demand rights, have political demands and do more than philanthropic support. The interviewed activists often also expressed similar views (see section 3.2, this chapter): the activities and demands of the groups were explicitly political. Even if groups did have NGO-like activities, at the same time they had political demands (like KAA and VJAS).

The third characteristic– coming again from Sheth – is that the politics of the micro-movements should expand horizontally through other similar micro-movements, which are in themselves often issue-based (see also Sangvai 2007). It has been argued in section 3 of this chapter that the politics of the groups under study indeed expanded

horizontally in terms of cooperation and particularly in terms of their own conceptualization of being part of a farmer 'movement'.

The fourth characteristic is that the micro-movements' politics are not merely local, but defined in trans-local terms. I will show in chapter VI that the demands and ideas of the groups – implicitly and explicitly – do refer to broad debates of global (farmer) movements.

Following Sheth, I thus perceive the groups I studied as 'micro-movements'. However, Sheth is not very particular about the nomenclature and does not insist on the word micro-movement. He states that he uses the terms grassroots movements, social movements, non-party political formations or processes, community based or mass based organisation and social-action groups and movement-groups interchangeably. Therefore, I want stay as close as I can at the interviewees' own language. The interviewees of this study used "*movement group*", "*movement*" or "*group*" mostly to refer to their small, rather well defined groups. I adopt the two terms "*movement group*" and "*group*". I leave aside the term "*movement*", because I use that term already in the sense of Bebbington for the sum of these micro-movements.

The question remains whether all these micro-movements, in sum, present a broader and coherent 'social movement' as such. For this discussion on a concept for the whole multitude of groups and activists, I return to Bebbington's definition (2009). It includes, I would argue, five characteristics that constitute a broader social movement.

The first characteristic is collective action. The activists and supporters engaged in these mobilizations in Vidarbha organize different collective actions as I showed in section 3 of this chapter (and also in section 2 of chapter V). Second, these collective actions need to be sustained over time. Even if – compared to the heydays of the peasant and farmers' movements (according to the literature, see section 2.3, this chapter) – the strength and activities of the present-day groups has decreased, they still persist at a low level of activity and continue to be active locally. The third characteristic is that a social movement consists of a set of actions and actors. My empirical data showed that there are many groups and individual activists who mobilize around the 'agrarian crisis' and 'farmers' issues. Most activists, leaders and supporters belonging to different groups recognized certain individual activists as being important farmer leaders and had some level of cooperation. The fourth characteristic is shared grievances and sense of injustice. The groups and individual activists acknowledged that they have similar demands and analyses of injustice as far as agricultural sector was concerned. For the supporters, it was clear that all the groups fought for prices. Taking into consideration these four characteristics, the different micro-movements and individual activists that mobilize around the 'agrarian crisis' in Vidarbha can be conceptualized as a social movement in the sense of Bebbington.

But the fifth characteristic that comes out of Bebbington's definition is more difficult to apply to the many groups in Vidarbha. It is that the movement should share a "*vision – perhaps not specified – of the need to find another way of organizing society and thinking*

about development" (Bebbington 2009). Sangvai (2007) argued that if one understands these groups as micro-movements, their struggles should not be understood in a local sense. Rather, each group brings forth "*distinct yet interrelated"* (ibid, 111) experiences and strategies to deal with the reality of neoliberal development, be it in the agricultural realm or not. However, because these experiences *"were part of the same macro reality, the resistance and creative responses too formed – sometimes unintentionally and sometimes deliberately – an interrelated and multi-front battle*" (ibid). When analyzing the demands of the different groups or micro-movements more clearly, it becomes clear that while the demands are indeed very similar, the political and ideological views of the activists were sometimes diametrically opposed to one another. Similar demands can gloss over differences between the groups in terms of ideologies as well as constituencies and material interests. Therefore, this characteristic would rather point to not conceptualising the heterogeneous multitude of groups as one 'movement'. This complexity of similar demands linking to different ideologies will be analysed in chapter VI.

Despite these difficulties with the fifth characteristic, the first four characteristics show a concurrence between Bebbington's definition and the situation on the ground. Therefore and to conclude, I conceptualize this multitude of groups that mobilize around agricultural issues in Vidarbha as a 'social movement' – a social movement that consists of a heterogeneous range of 'micro-movements' and individual activists.

V. Mobilizing with Trustworthiness

One of the main tasks of the movement groups is to mobilise people. In the case of Vidarbha and the 'agrarian crisis', I did find such mobilisations. The next issue, then, is to understand what reasons people had for being active in a movement group and what activists did in order to motivate people to participate. I found that in the case of the movement around the 'agrarian crisis' in Vidarbha, supporters decided to take part in a group's activities and to be part of the movement mainly based on the perceived trustworthiness of the respective activists and leaders. The movement actors struggled to maintain the reputation of trustworthiness because it was decisive for participation from the side of ordinary farmers.

The struggles and the importance of leaders and activists in mobilization are the focus of this chapter, but I also describe other reasons for (non-)participation in section 2. I analyse the strategies of leaders for maintaining trust, mobilizing and organizing supporters. I also look at the supporters' view of the activists and their strategies. I will start this chapter with an overview of the conceptual approaches to different functions of leadership in social movements in general (section 1.1) and South Asia in particular (section 1.2).

1 Leaders in Mobilization

Morris and Staggenborg (2011) as well as Goodwin and Jasper (2015) are interesting entry points into the conceptual and theoretical debates over the role of leaders in social movements. They all claim that leadership has been neglected in social movement theory compared to other issues. More recently though, there has been a renewed interest in an analysis of leadership that takes into account "*the numerous ways in which leaders generate social change and create the conditions for the agency of other participants*" (Morris and Staggenborg 2011, 174).

1.1 The Importance of Bridge Leaders

Leaders are conceptualized differently in the different social movement theories (see chapter I, section 1.2). For the collective behaviour theorists, Lang and Lang (1961) argue that leaders "*create impetus for movements by providing examples of action, directing action, and defining problems and proposing solutions*" (cited in Morris and Staggenborg 2011, 173). However, Smelser (1962) specified that though leadership is an essential factor, it is not sufficient to facilitate collective action. The political process theorists have also focussed on political process and therefore on political opportunity structures and have largely neglected the role of leaders in recognizing and acting on political opportunities (Goldstone 2001, Morris and Staggenborg 2011).

In the resource mobilization theory, leaders are seen as political entrepreneurs. Their task is to mobilize resources and found organizations responding to incentives and risks. The 'rational supporters' then follow those leaders who manage these tasks most effectively (see e.g. Zald and McCarthy 1977). Within this theory, particularly its

entrepreneurial-organizational version, however, there is both an overemphasis as well as a neglect of leadership. On the one hand, its proponents overemphasize agency of leaders in arguing that "*issue entrepreneurs can manufacture grievances"* (Morris and Staggenborg 2011, 173). On the other, the theory neglects the leaders' agency when analysing mobilizing structures. Despite the implicit assumption that leaders can direct a movement, there is no examination of the emergence or the consequences of leadership or the concrete work of mobilization (ibid).

One of the scholars who showed a renewed, novel interest in leadership is Gorringe (2010), who has argued that most studies analysing leadership, focus on leader-centred movements and tend to use the concept of charisma. Therefore, they cast movement participants without leadership functions as 'devotees' or 'followers'. The concept of charisma, however, remains rather nebulous and blurs the social relationships between the leaders and the masses that follow them (Melucci 1996). Rather, Gorringe argued, leadership needs to be seen as "*relational*" and leaders as "*strategic decision makers*". The leaders' task is then to inspire and organize their supporters and get them involved in collective action. In contrast to earlier theories, Gorringe argued that studies on leadership need to include the interface between the leaders and the led. Further he called to take away the spotlight from the grand leaders and focus on the "*painstaking work [on the ground], which is the essence of political mobilisation*" (Gorringe 2010, 122).

Leadership in social movements performs different functions and tasks. Arguably, those who do this painstaking work on the ground are the 'bridge leaders', a concept developed by Robnett (1997). Morris and Staggenborg (2011), building on Robnett (1997), argued that there are three ideal types of leadership functions that exist within movements. The first type occupies the formal leadership positions of the social movement organizations. The second type consists of leaders who occupy secondary positions in social movement organizations and constitute the immediate leadership team of the first type of leaders. The third type represents the bridge leaders.[69]

Robnett (1997) argued that bridge leaders are responsible for mobilizing supporters on the ground and maintaining their trust and interest in the movement. They operate at a grassroots level and create a connection between the movement organization and the supporters' everyday life. Goldstone (2001) has taken up the concept and defines a bridge leader as the one,

> *"which carries both the ideology and the organizational tasks of mobilizing down to the grass-roots level. Bridge leaders are those neighborhood and community organizers who mediate between top leadership and the vast bulk of followers, turning dreams and grand plans into on-the-ground realities" (Goldstone 2001, 158)*

I will adopt the concept of these three types of leaders, particularly the idea of the bridge leaders, to analyse leadership in Vidarbha. The focus of this chapter lies strongly on the leaders' tasks and on the "*painstaking work*" of mobilization.

[69] Morris and Staggenborg (2011) added a fourth type referring those bridge leaders, who also routinely engage in other leadership tasks.

1.2 Strategies of Leadership

All the above-mentioned types of leaders use different strategies to earn and maintain the trust of people, to mobilize them and to increase their own power. Jeffrey (2009) analysed two contradicting strategies of student leaders: social reformers and fixers. Fixing here means to successfully promote one's own interests and/or those of others by mediating between people and higher levels of a movement, group or the government (Manor 2000). These services are a necessity for many poor people, even those reluctant to political participation (Abraham 2014). Pure fixers would have no political ambitions beyond their locality and exclusively concentrate on their fixing skills. Jeffrey (2009) argued that activists can be only either fixers or social reformers, a choice that depends on the individual activists.

Price and Ruud (2010), in the foreword to their edited book on leadership in India, made a similar though not identical distinction. They argue that the people who try to become successful in the social or political sphere need to prove their abilities as fixers first. Having achieved this, leaders can adopt three different leadership styles that of course can be combined. For the case of the relatively small and powerless movement groups in this study, two of those styles are relevant.[70] The first type is the 'boss'. This refers to leaders having an amoral imperative of maintaining first and foremost their own interests. To do so, bosses redistribute resources on a relatively small-scale level. They might be associated with a political party and act as middleman between supporters on the ground and powers higher up. In contrast to pure fixers, they usually have political ambitions. Second, the 'lord-type' of leadership has more pronounced normative elements. Lords strongly rely on maintaining a reputation of honesty. Price and Ruud (2010), based on Burghart ([1996] 2008), argued that "*constituents' perceptions of their head as a benevolent person of expansive agency form a major element of allegiance to lordly leadership in the South Asian context*" (ibid, XXIV-XXV). In Hindu societies, the traditional model for a lordly leadership style is a god/goddess. But a more secular form of lordship is again the social reformer (Price and Ruud 2010).

Price and Ruud claimed that all ambitious leaders also need to have fixer qualities, even if they later rely on their reputation of honesty. Alm (2010) described what this means for an individual activist. He analysed how politically ambitious people in an Indian village try to build a constituency. He focused on new, emerging leaders who do not necessarily belong to families of large landowners or high castes and like to call themselves social reformers or social workers. In Alm's case study, there are many such leaders in one village competing for support. Alm described how these activists try to become men to whom people look up to, asking them for advice and help. They strive for a reputation of being someone who can achieve things. However, to gain power at the village level, Alm showed that it is not only important to gain a reputation as an able fixer, but one must at the same time maintain one's reputation as a social worker. Alm

[70] The third leadership style is captaincy. Captaincy denotes a political leadership over large polities, typically states of provinces. For the small groups in focus of this study, captaincy is not relevant.

uses the term social worker but, as Price and Ruud (2010, XXV) argue that it can be understood synonymously with social reformer (e.g. in Gorringe 2010).

Interestingly, a similar example comes from China where Xi Chen analyses conditions for trust in leaders in worker movements during industrial restructuring (Chen 2015). In China too, Chen argued, corruption was so widespread that anyone with public authority was easily suspected of not being trustworthy. He described how while powerful leaders are crucial for movements to emerge and grow, the suspicion against them is higher. Often, "*selfish motives*" (ibid, 139) attributed to a leader by workers is the criterion for considering him untrustworthy. And once the workers lost trust in a leader, the damage tended to be extensive. The reputation of the whole group could be severely affected, even if the leadership had changed. One more example comes from Auyero (2003) and the study of popular contention in Argentina. He described how suspicion of protest leaders can easily develop in movements and turn the people against the leadership.

In addition, Alm (2010) pointed towards a very interesting contradiction. He said that being a good fixer is closely related to being close to the powerful, to being able to use pressure to gain benefits for one's supporters. This contradicts the expectations of a social reformer, who is supposed to work for the good of all people, be nonpartisan and incorruptible. At a local level, it may be possible to combine the two. But at a certain point in time, the local leader will have to decide between improving his reputation of honesty as a social worker and sharpening his strategies as a fixer.

Nielsen (2012) showed this contradiction by describing the career of a social activist who wanted to join politics (Nielsen also used social activist, social reformer and social worker as synonyms (ibid, 436f)). This is a big step, because activists and supporters tend to see politics as an "*unprincipled game of dishonesty and corruption morally upright people should never engage in*" (Nielsen 2012, 436). While the social worker in the focus of Nielsen's study in India had high credibility in the beginning, he lost it when he entered politics. Those who engage in politics are seen as non-trustworthy per se, while social activists can more easily maintain their good reputation. Social activists can transcend the boundary between activism and politics, but they experience difficulties. This is also reflected in the description of lordly leaders by Price and Ruud (2010). Social reformers, they argue, emphasize their disillusionment with conventional politics. They want to be separated from the latter and make sure that their involvement in political mobilization is perceived as disinterested. If eventually they stand for elections, they are often heard arguing that they would be only social workers and therefore only serving others.

This discussion eventually leads to Partha Chatterjee's separation of political and civil society in globalised India (Chatterjee 2004). He argued that the political society has a set of rules that is sharply different from the ones of civil society and often includes recourse to actors and institutions that are extra-constitutional. Chatterjee viewed the persistence of political society, mostly formed by farmers and the urban poor, against the bourgeois civil society reflecting the failure to establish complete capitalist

hegemony in the society. In the political society, according to Chatterjee, negotiations of political nature define the rules of engagement between people, state and markets. Corbridge et al. (2005) challenge this notion and argue that local political society is often engaged in providing links and brokering deals between the government and people. Price and Ruud (2010, xxix) take up Corbridge's critique and argue that the boundaries between social and political activism still exist but have become permeable, which implicitly challenges Chatterjee's sharp separation. These discussions can only be touched upon here, because the focus lies on the work of mobilisation. Still, they build the background of this chapter when I focus on the movement actors' concrete efforts to negotiate these borders.

In order to analyse and conceptualize the strategies of the leaders in this study, I will base myself on the contradiction between being a fixer on the one hand and maintaining one's reputation as a social worker on the other. This contradiction is inherent in the studies of Jeffrey, Price and Ruud, Alms and Nielsen and is also very helpful in the context of this study.

1.3 Recalling the Terms

I would like to clarify which ones of the above-introduced terms I will use to analyse the situation in Vidarbha (see also the table below). I have described two systems of how to classify and name different leaders in a movement. The system of Morris and Staggenborg and Robnett refers to the different position a leader has within a movement, which naturally also includes different tasks (see 1.1). The system described in section 1.2 refers to the different strategies of leadership. Also this system links to different tasks of leaders, but has a different emphasis.

As far as the system described in section 1.1 is concerned, the scope of this study needs to be considered. Some of the groups of the present study are small without a large organizational structure (KAA, VJAS). Others do have an overhead structure (SSS, BKS, AIKS), but the study is focussed on the local or regional level of the movement activity. While I was able to interview some of the first type of leaders (following Morris and Staggenborg 2011), this was more about visions and hardly about the concrete work related to the movement. Consequently, in this section I focus on the strategies of mobilization mostly of the second type of leaders and third type, the bridge-leaders.

In an attempt to stay as close as possible to the movement actors' own nomenclature (for the *Marathi* words see table 9), I will use the word 'activist' or sometimes 'village activist' for the bridge leaders and the word 'leader' for the second type of leader. I name as supporters the movement actors without leadership functions. I prefer 'supporters' to followers to underline their agency, following Gorringe (2010). The borders between the first type of leaders, leaders, activists and supporters are fuzzy, –again due to the groups' small size and informal structure.

Concerning the system described in section 1.2, the interviewees never referred to themselves or the leaders of a group in the focus of this study as a social worker or reformer. Interviewees only used the word for other people not involved in the

movement (mostly to historical figures such as Phule). Using the same concepts (as I will show in the next section), they talked about this difference by distinguishing between 'movement leaders' and 'political leaders' or 'politicians'. I will adopt this nomenclature.

Using these notions, I show below how different leaders in the movement around the 'agrarian crisis' struggle to maintain their supporters' trust and interest and motivate them to participate in the groups' agitations.

Table 9: Recalling the different terms for leadership positions and strategies

	Term used in this study	**Corresponding words in *Marathi***	**Persons in these positions in the movement groups**
(1) Position in a movement (based on Robnett 1997, Goldstone 2001, Gorringe 2010, Morris and Staggenborg 2011)			
First type of leader	Leader	*mhorakya*	SSS: Raju Shetti KAA: *does not exist* VJAS: *does not exist* AIKS: *exists, no interview*
Second type of leader	Leader	*mhorakya, neta* (sometimes: *karyakarta)*	SSS: Ravikanth Tupkar KAA: Avinash Kakade VJAS: Kishor Tiwari AIKS: *no name*
Third type of leader (bridge-leader)	Activist Village activist	*karyakarta*	SSS: Shyam Avthale KAA: Suddham Pawar VJAS: Rajesh Rathod AIKS: *no name*
Supporter		*samarthaka*	
(2) Strategies of leadership (based on Manor 2000, Jeffrey 2009, Alm 2010, Price and Ruud 2010, Nielsen 2012)			
Fixer	Fixer		
Politician	Political leader Politician	*rajakiya nete, rajakiya pudhari*	
Social reformer **Social worker**	Movement leader	*sangathana nete, chalvaliche nete*	

2 Proving Trustworthiness

The guiding question for this chapter has been to understand the reasons for people's involvement in collective action as well as for their choice of one particular group. But before I extensively explain the reasons for participation, I will start with the reasons for non-participation. Three reasons for non-participation were mentioned often[71]. The first was that farmers did not have enough time to go to agitations. If there is only one man in the family, it is not possible to leave the fields for a day to go to agitations. The second reason is that they do not know about any groups or have not been informed about the on-going agitations. Third, some farmers argued that the groups did not raise their interests. Labourers mentioned that these groups were only for farmers and that nobody fought for labourers. Many small and medium farmers suspected that big landholders would not want to come to agitations because they did not suffer due to prices or lack of infrastructure and if and when the movement brought fruit, the large landholders could still profit from the success.

One group that very rarely participates in movement activities are the women. The reason that they themselves as well as the male supporters put forth was that agricultural politics was no issue for women and that it was a male realm. While women of course play a crucial role in agriculture, it seems that these political farmer movement groups are hardly a way for women to engage with agricultural issues. Another reason might be that women rarely own land in their names (see section 3.4, chapter II; section 1.1, chapter VII). As a consequence, they would, for example, have difficulties accessing the schemes that these movement groups are fighting for and they would therefore possibly have very different claims. I encountered little involvement by women. Sometimes, women or male supporters said that women supported movement groups' activities. One example is the KAA agitation to block the road after an accident (see below), where women went to offer moral support and provide food for the activists. Another example is VJAS, where the group takes up and supports women's demands to ban alcohol (see section 3.1, chapter IV). Last but not least, in many villages there are women's self-help groups. In village KAA, where I was able to visit a self-help group meeting, their activities are more self-help-oriented than political. However, the movement groups in this study are a overwhelmingly male endeavour, and its leadership is even more so.

Coming back to the question of why people decide to participate in a movement or not, whether or not the leader seemed trustworthy was the major reason mentioned.[72] Therefore, the strategies of leaders and activists to establish and maintain this trustworthiness are interesting to analyse from the perspective of leaders, activists as

[71] It was difficult to find people ready to talk about their reasons for non-participation. Therefore, I additionally rely on supporters guessing about the non-supporters' reasons.

[72] Apart from my own research, Wynistorf (2012) has also shown how particularly the trust in activists is central for movement participation in AIKS.

well as supporters. The movement groups are small, quite new and have little power or influence compared to the established political parties. I argue that the different traits that these activists and leaders have to fulfil to maintain the trust contradict each other. This creates a constant balancing act. Supporters use two major lines of argument to explain why they trust their respective activists and leaders and participate in their agitations. These lines of argumentation for trustworthiness neatly fit the concepts introduced above: fixing qualities and a reputation of honesty.

2.1 Fixing Qualities

If an activist or leader wants to build a broad constituency on a local level, he needs to prove that he is able to achieve things; these are his fixing qualities. Supporters often emphasized the concrete benefits that the respective activist or leader brought the village or them personally. Consequently, it is one important part of all the groups' work that the activists and leaders organize village level activities and directly support their constituencies. The activities I found can be categorized into three different categories. The first is to help supporters to interact with the government, either to get benefits they believe themselves entitled to or to protect them from government agencies in case the supporters feel treated unfairly; second, activists and leaders help supporters with input or output as well as labour market situations; and third, groups arrange concrete help in case of difficult personal situations as well as charitable activities. I explain each of these in more detail below.

Before coming to that, however, it is important to note that, despite the importance of the village activists, there is no clear process to define who becomes an activist. The principle was rather that one activist recommended other potential activists. In KAA, an activist explained that *"those who are good activists, we will ask them, who is another good activist. This is the process how we recommend each other."* In SSS, the process is a little different. They actively try to expand to new villages by approaching the *"key persons in the village, the ones that have the control over the village"*, as one activist of SSS explained.

Benefits from and Protection against the State

In all villages, supporters shared stories about how the activists helped them get access to government schemes, for example compensation for families of farmers who committed suicide, pension or irrigation schemes. An activist of VJAS said that the farmers participated in a group's activities if the activists

> *"are doing the work of the people with sincerity. If they [farmers] are getting the result, they will get involved in your group, but if you cheat them they will not follow you. When we are calling for the people to come for the agitation they are not saying 'no', they trust on us because we are doing their work."*

It is clear to supporters as well as activists that this "*work*" is a crucial part of their activities. But what exactly is it?

One supporter of VJAS described it as follows: *"If the kisans have work pending for the District Collector, this work is done by our activist. (…) One of our activists can do the work and pressurize the officer".* Another supporter of VJAS, a young farmer, had lost his mother and father because they had both committed suicide on the same day. He said that he had approached the activist, and then the leader, Tiwari, had helped him. He said that

> *"because of loan stress, both my parents had committed suicide on the same day, same place. The loan was around 80,000 Rupees, they had borrowed the loan from the co-operative society. Tiwari came here, then block development officer and Rathod [village activist] came here. They helped me in the process of getting the compensation of 1 lakh Rupees [for suicide of parents]."*

A supporter of AIKS reported that he was indebted because he could not sell his sugarcane as planned. He had approached several government officials as well as one BJP leader, but nobody had helped him. Eventually, he approached an activist of AIKS. The latter helped the supporter with the paperwork and got in touch with the owner of the respective sugar factory, notably this very BJP leader. The supporter shared that *"I got my money back and, looking at me, other people also came to know that if my problem was solved by AIKS, theirs was too. (…) From that moment, I was in AIKS only" (Wynistorf 2012).*

Supporters of KAA and SSS also talked about similar activities. But additionally and even if the activist is not there, the badges that the groups distribute to their supporters are a matter of support for the farmers while dealing with the government. The leader of KAA, Kakade, told me:

> *"Kisans used to go alone and faced many problems, troubles. Therefore we are giving this token [badge] to kisans. If the token is on his dress, government officials will know that this kisan belongs to a group. This creates pressure for the official and he behaves in a good manner. Kisans have good experiences from the last four years."*

Often, the activists and leaders start to engage when several farmers are concerned. Those stories then become well known in the respective villages. In the village of VJAS, eight farmers had planned to build a well. The government was supposed to pay the wages of the workers through the MGNREGA (see section 2.4, chapter II). The farmers had taken up loans, constructed the wells and paid the wages to the workers. However, even after sixty days, the government had not paid back the wages to farmers. They approached the village activist, who called the leader Tiwari and together with a local journalist, they tried to solve the issue. After another eight days, the farmers got their money. In the words of the activist *"the problem occurred just because one junior official was lazy and did not pay it. But because of our pressure, it was solved."*

In the village of KAA, many supporters narrated and corroborated an incident when a boy was killed by a truck accident in a neighbouring village. The village activist happened to be there, and he started to block the road. Other KAA supporters got in touch and blocked the road with motorbikes for several hours. They demanded a

compensation for the affected family as well as speed–breakers from the government. The police officers agreed and within the same day the government constructed speed–breakers on that road. Through this incident, as one supporter of KAA said, *"people from the other village realized that KAA is fighting for this people, so they joined our movement"*.

SSS supporters often complained that the Maharashtra State Electricity Board (MSEB) received subsidies from the government to provide 17–18 hours of electricity per day, but the farmers got only 6–7 hours. Moreover, the electricity comes mostly at night making it very difficult for the farmers to irrigate their fields, if they possess any irrigation facilities at all. Once, the farmers did not pay their electricity bills. The MSEB argued that the farmers should first pay their electricity bills and then demand more electricity. SSS did not agree and they organized an agitation. According to their supporters, MSEB officials became afraid of the SSS agitations and therefore they provided electricity to the farmers. The village activist described what the agitation looked like:

> *"We called all kisans to gather in front of MSEB and ask 'why did you cut off our electrical supply?' (...) If there isn't any response from their side, then we block the roads or we sit down on the main entry gate of MSEB to stop the entry and exit of MSEB staff from the office."*

However, despite this agitation, the MSEB officials had come to the village to cut off the electric supply. Villagers shared that the SSS supporters called each other and came together. They threatened the officials and banned their entry into the village. The village activist claimed that the officials *"are afraid, because this village belongs to SSS and the kisans won't let them enter. Even the people from the bank they are not coming to the village anymore. (...) And the result of this was that the kisans are not facing any problem*." About this agitation, an SSS supporter said that "*Avthale [village activist] had done such activities for the kisans – therefore we have trust on him."*

Also in the village of KAA and several neighbouring villages, MSEB had cut the farmers' electricity because they had not paid their electricity bills on time. KAA demanded to either waive the bills completely or suggested a compromise. The compromise was that the MSEB must give the farmers more time to pay the bills, namely until the end of the cropping season when the farmers would be in a better position. Many supporters mentioned the agitation that ensued. Kakade, the leader of KAA, described it as follows:

> *"We have collected the statistic how many kisans are there, how much land is there and how much it [power cut] will affect us. Then we have submitted that data to agriculture department, District Collector office, Chief Minister, vice–Chief Minister, but there was no output. Therefore in November we had arranged the rally (...). But nothing happened. Then we said that, in our location whichever department is running under your [MSEB] rule, it will not function, because we will lock it. If you are not supporting us then we will not help you (...). And then we had organized a rally in four locations, in one location 100 kisans came, in another location 80 kisans came, another location 100–125 kisans came. Four block level offices we have locked, regional offices we have locked, due to which we*

have created a lot of publicity. But before locking the doors, we asked the inside staff if they want to come out from the office, they can come and if they are not coming then also fine, we will lock from outside. (…) During this issue, the CM [Chief Minister of Maharashtra] came to this district, and we met the District Collector. First we want to meet to CM and if not then we stop his vehicle in the middle of the road. But finally we talked with the CM and the Minister of power (…). Finally they were ready, they said that if they [farmers] will stop the whole production, this won't be good. Then they have given us time till end of March. Government didn't support us, now they support us and we won in our movement."

In village KAA, the MSEB had built electrical transmission towers in the fields of farmers. The affected farmers accused the MSEB that they had not asked for permission and were not paying proper compensation. So the supporters of KAA went to the fields and tried to stop the construction work forcefully. The affected farmers told me how Pawar, the village activist, and other supporters of KAA stopped the work of MSEB workers and demanded compensation. In the end, many farmers reported that they received compensations from the MSEB. One of these farmers expressed that the activists of KAA *"gave support to the kisans to stop the construction. Now we feel that we want to support this KAA work"*. Moreover, KAA supported farmers who eventually filed a case in court against these electric towers. KAA provided information about the price of land and gave help with the documents and in writing applications and letters.

In village SSS, the government had planned to construct a dam close to the village. Many interviewees in this village feared that this dam would use the same water that the farmers use to irrigate their fields as well as for their household needs. The village activist was convinced that in that case, *"the kisans of the village will definitely die"* and the women will face problems in daily life. Therefore, the SSS demanded that the village should get access to a canal or pipeline distributing the water. The activist called an assembly in the village in order to inform the whole population about their complaints and demands. *"The purpose of that assembly was to make the kisans and labour aware, that this is not an issue of farming. If the water is going to another village, irrigation will not be there and even the labour will not get the drinking water"* as the village activist told. The *sarpanch* of the respective village needed to sign a no–objection–certificate for the construction work of the dam to start. The assembly forced the *sarpanch* to sign this certificate only if the demands were met. Despite all these efforts, the dam was built and the village did not get water from it. Therefore, the village activist tapped the pipeline running from the lake to the nearby town and redirected the water to the village of SSS.

In the village of VJAS, the construction of a dam has been on-going for years. The construction site is close to the village and therefore the government took away the land of several farmers and gave them some compensation. These farmers complained that they either did not get any compensation or the compensation they received was too small. A small farmer complained that *"I lost around 5 acres of land, and (…) they gave us only the government price, even if this land was totally irrigated land."* Further, the water of the dam did not go to their village for the irrigation, but to another area. Some of

these farmers approached the village activist. VJAS organised agitations in a nearby town and filed cases to get higher compensation. Some supporters reported that in the end they received compensation for their land thanks to VJAS, but others were disappointed. One farmer said that *"we tried to stop the construction of the dam, but the dam is completed now. (…) Even we do not get the water from this dam, the water is going to another village. The main source of income, land, we have lost it. Our future will be full of problems due to the dam."*

Another example for activities targeting the state is the following. KAA was not satisfied with the allocation of drought compensation. The decision whether or not to consider an area drought-prone and therefore eligible for compensation payments depends on rain measurement instruments that the government had installed at the block level. According to the leader of KAA, this led to a crude solution and as a consequence some villages were not considered drought-prone, even though they had received very little rainfall. Even if in the majority of villages in a block the rains are above average, some villages still have drought problems. Consequently, KAA demanded rain measurement instruments at the village level.

Wynistorf (2012) also described an example where AIKS interacted with the government. In a neighbouring village, there was a problem with a veterinary clinic. The doctor's post had been vacant for many years. Supporters of AIKS narrated that a cow belonging to one of the supporters died because it could not be treated in time. Therefore, they *"took this question to Kisan Sabha [AIKS] and then it was sent to agricultural Minister. It was successful and a doctor was appointed there. So the people started thinking that through Kisan Sabha we can get some solutions".*

Improving the Situation in the Markets

In many cases, supporters of groups shared incidents when the groups helped them in the input market and in one case, also in labour markets. Many supporters of KAA complained that once, during sowing, there was a seed shortage on the local market. They came to know about the shortage some days in advance and believed that the traders created it artificially. So KAA activists met the Agriculture Officer and the District Collector and informed them of the impending situation. The activists demanded that the officials should do something about it. But, as the village activist argued, because the officials *"have not worked properly then we [farmers and activists] have caught their shirt and asked, why we are not getting the seeds"*. In the end, the District Collector intervened and the shortage was prevented.

Many SSS supporters reported direct benefits, namely higher prices, for the farmers from agitations in the marketplace. Several supporters told a story about a trader who used to fix prices in the cotton market according to his whims. The farmers approached the village activist and he organized an agitation. The farmers went to the marketplace, blocked the offices of the traders and negotiated with the traders for higher prices.

In the case of VJAS, not many interviewees mentioned activities that were particularly addressed at the market. But one supporter reported that *"one trader cheated the kisans.*

He has given bogus fertilizer to the kisans." The supporter approached the village activist and *"then we went there in front of that shop, and he had returned the money back to the kisans. (…) From this village, 50 kisans got back their money. And this was organized by our VJAS"*.

BKS is not very active (see section 3.1, chapter IV), but interventions in the markets are the only activities the supporters of the organisation spoke about. According to the farmers, the labourers dealing with the agricultural products in the nearby marketplace often cheated while measuring the produce. One farmer said that *"we demanded to start the electrical weight machines in the agriculture market. Kisans had bad experience in the old weight machines."* He reported that the situation improved after this agitation.

Importantly, KAA has its "*constructive leg*", including marketing activities such as a shop for organic farm products, trainings for farmers on how organic farming works and the "*Root Milk"* project (see section 3.1, chapter IV; also section 2.3 chapter VI). All these activities can also be considered 'fixing' activities that aim at improving the (long-term) situation of the farmers in the output market.

In the village of VJAS, many supporters said that they had profited from an initiative of VJAS to increase the wages for *tendu* leaf cutters. After the harvest of the tobacco leaves, *tendu* leaves are cut from the forest for about one month in May. The forest belongs to the Forest Department, which holds auctions to allot the contracts for *tendu* leaf collection. Thereafter, the contractors hire labour for the cutting work with an obligation to pay the minimum wages as decided by the government. The labourers collect the *tendu* leaves in bags, each containing 100 leaves, and get paid per bag. But interviewees reported that the labourers received below minimum wage amounts while the contractors had earned money by selling the *tendu* leaves. The leader as well as the village activist called for an agitation against low wages and the group organised an agitation in various villages. Eventually, the labourers received higher wages. This agitation is the only one I found directed at higher wages in a labour market. When farmers talked about labour, they usually referred to labour market situations where the farmers were employers or both employers and labourers. In the business of *tendu* leaves, in contrast, farmers were solely labourers.

Immediate Help

Last but not least, if one their supporters is in a particularly difficult situation, village activists asserted that the group tries to help him/her. If possible, activists and mostly leaders raise funds to help them financially. An SSS activist said that

> *"whenever the kisans are in trouble, we are going there to help. Once we had done blood donation also. This movement is very good for the kisans. Whenever any kisan is in need of economic help for the medical treatment, we had contributed some money for the help. Anything we do."*

Beyond that, many supporters mentioned that it was an important part of the groups' work to encourage the farmers. Supporters often told me that they got moral support from the group, a feeling that others are going through the same problems. The leader of

SSS pointed out that their most important task was to tell the farmers that they *"shouldn't drink the poison, but come for the agitation."* Also supporters of KAA saw emotional support as an important issue. One supporter said that "*this KAA, Kakade is fighting. They are also unable to give money, but they have motivated me, given me emotional support.*" And Kakade himself assured that "*we are giving suggestion to the kisans and tell them what to do. We can give suggestions and courage to people not to commit suicide.*"

The local activist of VJAS also reported several cases of economic support. Tiwari pointed out often that he supported widows in particular and provided them with training. But according to the local activist, this did not take place in the village of this study and therefore the farmers did not mention these activities. What they did mention, though, was that the leader Tiwari had come to farmers in the period of trouble, particularly if someone had committed suicide, and had supported the bereaved morally as well as financially. Additionally, not only in cases of a problem but even if there is a big function in the village, Tiwari comes to the village and as the local activist emphasised, *"through him, other important, rich people from nearby villages also come, big politicians come, all activists will also be there".*

All these examples show that it is crucial for the groups to have activists in the villages that are 'fixers' and can organize activities and motivate farmers to participate.

Success in Other Contexts

At a higher level, these fixing qualities do not show up in everyday interactions, but in the successes that a group – and its leader – can achieve in negotiations with the government in another (geographical) context. The leader of SSS, Tupkar, emphasized that he was fascinated by the work of Raju Shetti, the leader of SSS, in Western Maharashtra. Tupkar first worked for Raju Shetti in Western Maharashtra before he established SSS in Vidarbha (see section 3.1, chapter IV). He was inspired by Shetti's work and success in Western Maharashtra and he sought to replicate his success story in Vidarbha. Tupkar argued that "*we should not talk about what we have done, but the future is important. Raju Shetti is very powerful. The political leaders and the government are afraid of him and of what he could change."* Tupkar and the activists of SSS therefore pointed out Shetti's successes particularly in mobilizing young farmers.

Farmers also mentioned Raju Shetti's successes in Western Maharashtra. A farmer said that *"I am proud that I am in SSS. Because whatever they had done in Western Maharashtra, the same thing should be done in Vidarbha"*. Surprisingly, Shetti's succeeded in motivating supporters not just of SSS, but supporters of other groups, particularly KAA and AIKS, as well. Farmers often expressed their frustration that agriculture was not profitable and the agitations organized by different groups had not been successful. But in Western Maharashtra, so many farmers imagined that agriculture was flourishing and profitable. Consequently, many farmers and activists felt that Shetti was an inspiration for them because they could see that it was possible *"to do*

something". One supporter of KAA argued that *"Shetti is a real leader of kisans because the government has accepted his demands."*

These fixing qualities on different levels are crucial for the trustworthiness and therefore for the success of the leaders, activists and movement groups. To achieve these fixing qualities, the leaders and activists need to be close to the powerful and build bonds with the established parties. At the same time, they need to compete with the established parties in offering these fixing qualities. They can hardly win in this realm, though. This is not only because they are not remotely as powerful as the political parties. It is also because being close to the powerful and seriously engaging in these activities means to risk the most important trait that gives them an advantage over the established parties: their reputation of honesty.

2.2 Assuring Honesty – Staying Out of Politics

Honesty is then the second, crucial argument for mobilizing people, especially because these groups are small and new. Besides trying to keep themselves distinct from 'political leaders', the movement leaders constantly need to reassert their honest intentions. Supporters, particularly active supporters with personal ties to village activists, often noted that their respective activist/leader was honest and doing all this *"from the bottom of his heart"*. However, to demonstrate honesty to the larger base of supporters is a delicate issue and empirically this means distancing oneself from 'politics'. Leaders, activists as well as supporters often defended the group's honesty by arguing that the group was not "*in politics*". If interviewees accused activists or leaders to be "*interested only in politics*", it meant that these activists or leaders – or then politicians – did not fight for a cause but only for their personal interests. Therefore, the activists and leaders were eager to emphasize that they were not a political party but a *sanghatana* – a movement group. This now shows one more balancing act for the activists and leaders. On the one hand, politics is seen as being entrenched in a dishonesty and corruption that honest people should stay away from. On the other, supporters as well as activists and leaders believe that real change can only happen through democratic institutions and therefore electoral politics. The activists and leaders therefore find many arguments to manage this paradox of staying a movement leader or activist even if they are in one way or another involved in electoral politics. How did this whole problem of movement leaders who joined politics start in Vidarbha?

Movement Leaders in Politics

Sharad Joshi of the New Farmers' Movement *Shetkari Sanghatana* (see section 2.4, chapter IV) is the most prominent example of a 'movement leader' who after having turned into a 'politician' lost the trust of the farmers. Joshi's entry into politics caused many supporters to leave *Shetkari Sanghatana.* One farmer who now supports KAA said that *"I was part in Sharad Joshi's agitation, I was in front (…). Kisans started to give respect to Sharad Joshi as god of kisans, but unfortunately he entered in politics"*. Joshi

himself argued that *"I used my abilities as an MP [Member of Parliament][73] to push forward the issues of kisans*". He conceded that his party joined the National Democratic Alliance led by the BJP but that, he maintained, did not mean joining the BJP. He added that his party remained independent and collaborated with the BJP on the common issues of liberalization and globalization.

Joshi's career, many activists and leaders claimed, was the reason why farmers would have difficulties trusting any movement leader again. This makes mobilization difficult for today's movements. One supporter of AIKS clearly stated that *"to join politics, this man did a drama. He made use of poor people and then left these people alone."* Later this supporter added that even in AIKS such a problem existed and *"when they [the activists/leaders] get a post they forget everything, like Sharad Joshi did."* This makes it clear how important it is to maintain a reputation of not being in politics.

Sharad Joshi's story heightened the farmers' mistrust of activists and leaders. Many supporters felt – like one supporter of KAA – that the transformation of a "*movement leader into a political leader, like MP or MLA [Member of Legislative Assembly][74]*" was a problem. In this transformation, an activist of VJAS argued, the leaders would *"forget the kisans, and focus on his own development and increase his wealth"*. A farmer in the village of AIKS said that "*to join politics these people make use of the poor people and then leave them alone. Let it be AIKS or something else, they do not do anything for the kisans. If they reach heights, they leave the kisans behind. Now the kisans do not have faith in any leaders."* This helplessness in the face of leaders who change once they come to power is prominent in many interviews. A supporter of AIKS stated that "*the main enemy of the kisan is the leader who doesn't fight for the kisans*". He clarified that he spoke of the leaders who joined politics and "*automatically become like them [politicians] only*".

Selflessness in Politics

This makes it clear how important it is to maintain the reputation of being honest. Therefore, for all the leaders and activists, it was important to emphasize that the decision to start or join a movement group was an altruistic decision not motivated by their own vested interest. The leader of VJAS justified his activism by saying that "*nowadays god is too busy because there are too many people, the world is overcrowded. So god has people like myself who help him and care for the poor people".* Later he explained why he founded a movement group and not a political party by talking about his early life when he was

> *"fascinated to do politics. But then I learned that politics is a pain. So I shifted my focus from politics to hardship. I saw that the people we want to represent, they are too poor, they cannot decide on their own. They are in the clutches of administration, money lenders, wrong agricultural practices."*

[73] A Member of Parliament (MP) is a representative elected by the voters of an electoral district to the legislature at national level in the *Lok Sabha*, the lower house.

[74] A Member of Legislative Assembly (MLA) is a representative elected by the voters of an electoral district to the legislature at state level.

While this shows a certain paternalistic tendency, the leader of KAA ostensibly argued that his decision to join electoral politics was entirely dependent on the support of other members of his group. He assured that *"I don't want to be MLA or MP. Working for the welfare of the people is not an easy task. But if it is a felt need by the people, I am ready. (…) It is not a sacrifice. My inherent happiness is based on the work with people."*

Activists of SSS also talked about their solidarity. Tupkar, the leader of SSS, repeatedly expressed his solidarity with the farmers of Vidarbha and his anger about their suffering. But the village activist reasoned that *"each person has his own dream to do something in the whole life, someone's dream is to do a good job, buy a good flat and stay with the family (…). But I enjoy more when I am doing some work for others rather than for myself."*

The above examples show an intention to demonstrate that the decision to join a movement group was a result of deep involvement and not out of a desire for political power. For however hard all these groups try to maintain their identity as a movement, though, they are all involved in political struggles; they cooperate with political parties and some of them are even involved in electoral politics. To bridge this contradiction, activists and leaders find interesting explanations why they do or do not engage in electoral politics.

For SSS, the distinction between movement and political party is most delicate. SSS consists of a *sanghatana* (organization, movement) and a *paksha* (party)[75]. Leader Tupkar explained that *"the sanghatana is responsible for the agitations, the paksha for the elections"*. But all the same time, SSS activists and leaders argue against political parties. In their understanding, political parties are only the big parties, but not the small, emerging ones. Therefore, it is no contradiction to argue against political parties and at the same time contest elections under the banner of *Shetkari Svabhimani Paksha*.

[75] In India, to participate in elections, one must be officially registered as a political party with the Election Commission. An individual can stand for elections as an independent, but no one is allowed to stand for elections representing an organization that is not registered as a party.

Picture 7: Rally of *Shetkari Svabhimani Sanghatana* and *Paksha* in Nagpur

KAA has no aspirations to join electoral politics. They are not connected to any political party, but they are close to the former ruling Congress Party. The activists of KAA want to make sure that they are not a party, but they did not deny the option of taking part in electoral politics. Leader Kakade emphasised that whether or not KAA agitated inside electoral politics *"depends on what people expect of us. (…) If a time comes when public says that nobody is liable to go to that position and KAA is fit to get that position, that time we will think about that also."*

In the case of VJAS, leader Tiwari once tried entering politics but was disappointed. He said that *"VJAS has good support of the people. But only at the time of elections, people are not supporting us. (…) We are telling to people that if we are in a chair position, we can do many things for the kisans."* During the time of my fieldwork, I learned that he had withdrawn from party politics but cooperated with Shiv Sena and BJP for selective agitations. One supporter explained that "*our people [VJAS activists standing for other parties] are standing for the elections, so they need support. For this purpose he [Tiwari] came here, so kisans will get price."* Compared to SSS, Tiwari argued more convincingly against NGOs than against political parties. He emphasized often that VJAS was "*an activist organization, not an NGO*". But he also defined clearly what an activist or leader of a movement group was in contrast to a politician or a NGO worker. The role of an activist was to fight for the right of farmers and organise them. Activists should not take money or funds from anybody but rather "*tell political parties to agitate*".

For all groups, it is important that activists and leaders are not corrupt. Tupkar from SSS, for example, assured that they chose activists as candidates in elections *"who are not corrupt, those who are really fighting for the kisans from the bottom of their heart."* One supporter of SSS argued that their party candidates were not corrupt because they were new. Another SSS supporter reasoned that "*all political parties have got their chance in the past to be the ruling party. But this time we will give a chance to SSS because they are new.*"

Wynistorf (2012) describes the same desire to demonstrate selflessness for AIKS. AIKS activists asserted that they did not get any benefit from working for or supporting the party but were active only to fight for the rights of the farmers. Often, supporters explained that AIKS had taught them how important it is to fight selflessly and not work for one's own benefits. While AIKS was clearly linked to a political party, the supporters and activists distanced themselves from more established political parties by arguing that they were a poor party working for the poor people. Activists of VJAS and SSS brought forward the same argument. Supporters and activists of SSS argued that SSS was a poor party and survived from farmers' support. The farmers donated to them because they knew that SSS worked for their issues. One activist said that SSS did not have *"too much money, no vehicle, but only bullock carts – but we have good ideas."*

This went hand in hand with the feeling of some supporters, that a new and comparatively small group would be more reachable for them. One supporter was convinced that if SSS leaders would come to power, they would go to each house in Vidarbha and listen to the farmers' problems and there would be no need of appointments or security guards – *"people could just come and meet them."* Another farmer, supporter of SSS, said that *"they would take money from all corrupt people and distribute it to the kisans and spend it for development activities of Vidarbha."* To summarize, the farmers hoped for a leader who was easily accessible to them and took their concerns seriously. A supporter of SSS argued that "*there will be no need to take appointment to meet these leaders, because they are also sons of kisans, we can go any time to meet them.*"

The problem of the unreachability of political leaders made many activists and leaders and some farmers arguing in favour of a separate state for Vidarbha[76] – particularly, but not only, by VJAS, whose leader is one of the leading proponents of this claim. An activist argued that

> *"the Minister will be ours only. (…) Definitely our Minister would give better prices and more subsidies. (…) We could control our cotton market and get higher prices. (…) If we would have a small state, we could ask to the officer 'ok, show me today what work you have done'. But now our state is too big, nobody is asking whether the leaders have done their work or not."*

On another note, activists and leaders mentioned differences between the groups and political parties at the level of the content of their demands. While the issue of prices for agricultural outputs is crucial for the groups, activists and leaders claimed that other parties were not consistent on this point. The politicians of other parties, the SSS leader argued, flip-flopped between 'agrarian crisis' and farmer suicides and "*demands for*

[76] Some politicians from various parties (e.g. BJP) are in favour of a separate Vidarbha. If Vidarbha would be a separate state, so the argument goes, the administration and government structure would be more effective and more approachable. Furthermore, against a background of high inequality in terms of wealth, development and power within Maharashtra state, this request is quite prominent. Other successful succession movements, i.e. Jharkhand and Chhattisgarh, motivate these ambitions.

higher prices for agricultural products on one day, and on the next day they talk about consumers and that they want to fight the inflation of food prices." This argument, however, is very delicate (see chapter VI).

These varied justifications of trustworthiness and efforts to maintain one's reputation uncover the difficulty of this balancing act. Clear distinctions were made in rhetoric but in actual political practice of movement actors, it is very difficult to keep these distinctions up. First, the groups often need to cooperate with the established political parties, and at times they want to take part in electoral politics. Second, the activists have to do their work in the context of a village where they compete against other activists, often from established parties. Last but not least, some leaders themselves questioned the distinction between politics and social movements and often looked for a way out.

2.3 Challenges: Blurring the Line

Dealing with Political Parties

All movement groups are involved in political struggles and cooperate to some extent with political parties. Often, supporters, activists and leaders argued like leader Tupkar of SSS, who said that *"you cannot clap with one hand only. So our Svabhimani Shetkari Sanghatana cannot fight alone. We have hopes that if we support others now, also political parties, in future agitations they will support us."* Therefore, many groups do cooperate to some extent with the established political parties.

Because the situation of the farmers is perceived as quite pitiable, particularly under the current Congress/Nationalist Congress government, SSS in particular does not want to cooperate with these two parties. But the parties in opposition at the time of the study (BJP and *Shiv Sena*) are difficult coalition partners too. Tupkar complained that even if the big parties in opposition had their seats in the parliament, they did not enable a positive approach by the government to farmers. When these parties took part in street level agitations, Tupkar asked *"why are these opposition party leaders fighting for the issues of kisans on the roads? This is not important. They have to fight in the Vidhan Sabha*[77]*. Therefore it is very shameful that they are coming on the road for this agitation".*

Also at the local level, Tupkar had serious troubles with local BJP representatives and felt that it was impossible to cooperate with them locally anymore (see section 3.3, chapter IV). In Buldhana, the district co-operative bank that used to give loans to farmers as well as to implement loan waiver schemes from the government had recently gone bankrupt. The reason was, according to Tupkar, that big political leaders from all the big parties, who included owners of big sugarcane factories, had taken huge loans and then refused to pay them back with impunity. Tupkar was appalled by the fact that when farmers don't repay their loans, it becomes a huge issue. The politicians did not repay crores of Rupees, but no action was taken against them. Because of the bankruptcy, there were no longer any loans for farmers, which had severe

[77] The *Vidhan Sabha*, the Legislative Assembly, is the lower house on state level.

consequences, particularly at the time of sowing. Farmers could only rely on moneylenders for loans. Therefore, so Tupkar argued, it was crucial to organize agitations against this bankruptcy. Together with journalists, SSS had made the names of these political leaders public who had failed to repay their loans. This had resulted in threats and legal charges against Tupkar. Some of these politicians wanted an externment (eviction) order against him to prevent him from staying in Buldhana. Tupkar was convinced that at the local level, these political parties would never cooperate with him anymore, because they were very upset.

Even if a local level cooperation was no longer conceivable for Tupkar, he said that the leaders of SSS at the state level were considering cooperating with BJP. If the state level authorities of SSS decided that cooperation should be established, the local group would follow. Tupkar argued that

> *"in this state [Maharashtra], National Congress and Nationalist Congress Party they are ruling and they are exploiting the kisans. We need to change the government. Only then, the kisans will get their benefits and they will be happier. (…) MLA Raju Shetti told us that wherever there are possibilities to support Shiv Sena and BJP we will support them – so the Congress will lose."*

Tupkar said that a broad coalition against the Congress was really needed to change the current government. But at the same time, he did not want to join hands with the communalist forces in the opposition. Therefore, SSS would not cooperate with those parties unless there was a broad anti-Congress alliance. "*We have no other choice*", Tupkar believed. He was also convinced that uniting many different people and groups – even the ones he does not like – was the way forward.

In this context, SSS also collaborated with parties from the other end of the political spectrum, such as Peasants and Workers Party (*Shetkari Khamgar Paksha*) and *Communist Party of India* (see section 3.3, chapter IV). But when SSS supported BJP, these cooperations between SSS and those leftist parties ceased. Still, it was important for Tupkar that SSS did not want to join the big parties. Because, he argued, the "*problem with Sharad Joshi was not that he went into politics but that he changed parties several times. First he went to Congress, then to BJP*". Therefore, at the local level, *Svabhimani Shetkari Paksha* stood for the *zilla parishad* and *panchayat samiti*[78] elections with their own candidates.

Even if KAA was not involved in electoral politics, the leaders were closely connected to the then ruling party, the Congress. They openly claimed to be followers of the Congress, but they criticised the party too. A supporter of AIKS confirmed that KAA "*are in support of Congress, but they are fighting. Congress is unhappy with them*". However, several supporters of KAA had the suspicion that KAA would cooperate with the government.

[78] The *zilla parishad* is the third tier of the *panchayati raj* system (see chapter 3.4, part II). The *panchayat samiti* is a local government body at the level of development block. The *panchayat samiti* is the link between the *gram panchayat* (village council) and the *zilla parishad* (district board).

One of them accused KAA of being "*part of the government. They cannot fight with the government, because compromise is the only way for them*."

Though the activists of BKS strictly denied being involved in or connected to politics, cooperation with the BJP was strong, according to them. One member said that *"we work together with our whole group, you know, this BJP, then RSS and Bajrang Dal"*. Many activists of BKS were at the same time active in RSS, BJP or *Shiv Sena*. A leader argued, however, that even if "*BKS is akin to politics because our demands are political*", they did not want to associate with politics. BKS, he explained, "*is like a house and politics is like the shoes that kisans should take off before entering"*.

In the case of AIKS being clearly linked to a political party, this debate is quite important. While many activists and leaders argued that joining electoral politics was an important means to bring about change in a democracy, some supporters were more critical. One claimed that AIKS

> *"should not be connected to a political party, it should just be a kisans' movement. If it is connected to politics then they have political intentions in this field, whereas it should be for kisan's benefits. If it is connected to politics, the leaders do not do anything for the kisans they just look for their political career."*

Despite the mistrust against the leaders from the established political parties, activists, leaders as well as supporters of all groups acknowledged that there were some activists who did not belong to their movement groups who nevertheless did a lot "*for the kisans*". These leaders belonged to established political parties but interviewees talked about them as individual "*kisans' leaders*" (see section 3.2, chapter IV). Nevertheless, the mistrust persisted and many agreed with one supporter of KAA who argued that *"we shouldn't gather behind any political leader because they will not do anything for the kisans, they are only interested in votes."*

Competing with Parties on a Village Level

At the local level, movement groups' activists competed with other activists mostly from political parties. Often, so supporters maintained, the political parties saw the movement groups as competitors, if not threats to their own position. Sometimes, as supporters of VJAS explained, activists of political parties did not interact with supporters of VJAS. One supporter described how parties tried to convince people to vote for them but did not approach supporters of VJAS. He said that *"the [other] candidates had given money to the voters to give vote to them. And the candidates are also afraid of VJAS. They will not give money to our people for the voting."*

But more often, the competition was stronger. Many said that the problem came from the side of the activists of other parties rather than the activists of the movement groups. According to SSS activists, the former tried to pressure farmers to keep them voting for their own parties. One supporter of SSS said that the rich farmers, who supported some political parties, tried to "*influence and pressurize the small kisans*." Another supporter explained how this pressuring worked. *"The political parties don't want this group [SSS]. They tell the kisans 'don't go [to meetings of SSS], you will not get*

any benefit and advantage'. (…) If the big politicians will come to know that their kisans are giving support to another group [SSS], these leaders will stop the schemes for these kisans." The leader of SSS explained that the political leaders told the farmers that, if they attended a program of SSS, "'*I will not do your work anymore.' Whatever work for the bank or the court, they will not complete.*" Also an activist of VJAS explained what the pressuring of supporters looks like:

> *"Suppose I am big person, a money lender, in the village, and I'm giving the money to the people for the loans for seeds, for household expenses. Then they will listen to me only. When this Tiwari is calling for the villagers, people they are not coming, because these moneylenders will say that this Tiwari is not a good person, don't go for the agitation."*

However, Tupkar and other activists were aware that their group did not have the same power as an established party to support the farmers at the local level. But still, Tupkar assured, "*even the MLAs and MPs they are afraid that if the kisans join SSS they will stand on their own legs. (…) That is why they are pressurizing the villagers."* A similar point was also important for activists of AIKS who argued that the established parties deliberately tried to keep the farmers uneducated and uninformed to keep them from protesting (Wynistorf 2012).

Most of the farmers in villages belonged to a political party already. An activist of SSS said that "*while talking to kisans, some said 'I belong to BJP', some belong to Congress. These people also said that 'we will support SSS now, because in the future this group will do something'*". For SSS activists, there was no problem with supporting a party and SSS at the same time. One supporter explained that

> *"political parties are in each village. They have a party board in the village. SSS doesn't have a board, but our name [SSS] is in the mind of kisans, people know how this SSS had fought for the kisans in Western Maharashtra. Some people are directly active in SSS, some are indirectly involved in this group. Some people belong to another party but they will vote for Svabhimani Shetkari Paksha [party part of SSS]. Because they are also sons of kisans."*

SSS activists as well as supporters agreed that it was possible to support a party and SSS at the same time. But if SSS became a party and asked farmers to vote for them, many thought that this double support would cease to exist. Consequently, some farmers did not think that SSS's step into politics – as *Svabhimani Shetkari Paksha* – was a good idea. One supporter argued that "*the party is creating hierarchy among the kisans. This brings us troubles. (…) We will support movement, not the party*".

Furthermore, people in the villages often did not agree with the sharp distinctions between politics and movements, and more particularly about who was in politics and who was part of a movement. In all villages, there were critical voices. Generally, it was the political parties that were suspected of being only interested in votes. Many supporters of several groups accused them of "*coming only at times of elections*" or "*being only interested in their own benefits*". While most supporters thought that the groups were different from political parties, others argued that they were just the same.

One supporter of KAA reported that *"other [kisans] don't have any hopes, they think that we [KAA] are taking money from other people."* In village SSS, one supporter said that "*there are some opponents also [in the village]. (…) Some kisans have hopes that Avthale [the activist on village level] is doing good work, some kisans think he doesn't have any other work and therefore he is doing this work and taking money from the kisans.*" In case of VJAS, the critical remarks went against the leader. One farmer from village VJAS reported that *"some people think that he [Tiwari] is doing all this work for his own benefit. They are saying that this Tiwari is taking money from the officers and he will keep his mouth shut. There is an incident of this type also. But sorry, I cannot speak more on this topic"*. The same farmer explained simply that he had not benefited at all and was disappointed, but he would still be part of the group because he did not want to break any relationships with the activists.

Another way to distinguish between the movement groups and political parties also causes friction between the two kinds of formations. Many supporters and activists, particularly of SSS and AIKS, mentioned that, as opposed to the political leaders, SSS or AIKS activists did not give money to farmers to come to their agitations. An activist said that

> *"the kisans they are coming for the programs and meetings by spending their own money for traveling – but political leaders for their programs and meetings, they are spending money from their own pockets [for the farmers to come]. Therefore kisans' participation is higher in the political parties."*

In AIKS, supporters often argued that political parties actively gave money to attract people or get them to support AIKS. They also said that if these people joined other parties, they would get benefits. AIKS was neither capable nor willing to give such kind of money to potential supporters. Rather, it is an important part of AIKS's self-conception that working for or supporting the group must not result in a direct benefit (Wynistorf 2012).

Starting from the Grassroots

These examples show that the movement actors are well aware of the inconsistency implicit in their notions of trustworthiness. Cooperation and competition with established parties or participation in electoral systems are part of the movement groups' political practice. Therefore, leaders in particular sometimes reflected about their position from an emic perspective, as illustrated below.

Despite all the criticism of politicians, there are some voices among supporters and activists who question the anti-politics narrative. Activists of KAA and SSS reflected on how to position themselves within the political system. Tupkar, leader of SSS, was convinced that "*it is better to be in the political system than trying to change it from outside. Because in the parliament is the place where things are decided."* Supporters of KAA said that they lived in a democracy and that the farmers had the power to control politics. One supporter argued that "*we can complain about politics, but this is democracy and we have elected these politicians ourselves*."

Kakade further argued that people should rethink their conception of politicians. *"Nowadays we are thinking that today's politicians have not studied people's problems and they also don't have a mission for what they are in politics. But they have a mandate of voters today."* He argued that the only goal was to raise the standard of living for people and that they needed activists working towards that goal. He further reflected that

> *"in our democracy, people studying the problems of the people and taking them to the state authority, they are politicians. (…) If politicians are those, who think of the welfare of the state, then I am the person of politics. Politics is not only to take power. (…) Therefore KAA is a political organization."*

Kakade believes that to achieve trust regardless of one's involvement in electoral politics or not, they had to build up leadership at the local level. He suggested that "*Suddham [local activist] is a unique example of how a public representative should be somebody who knows peoples' problems. We try to strengthen the capabilities of such local leaders."* On the other hand, another supporter of KAA who appreciated the very leader under discussion also said that *"Suddham is a good leader, but he is not a political leader, only a movement leader. A political leader is needed to fight for the issues of the kisans."*

3 Concluding Thoughts: Powerless, but Honest?

Based on the insights gained through the interviews, I found that one of the most important reasons for supporters to support a movement group was the trustworthiness of its leaders or activists. It is to a great extent the activists or 'bridge-leaders' (Robnett 1997, see section 1.1) who construct this trustworthiness at the local level. To manage the balancing act between being a good 'fixer' (Manor 2000, see section 1.2) and being honest is very difficult and relies strongly on the bridge-leader qualities of the activists as well as, sometimes, the leaders. This implies that the leaders and activists play a pivotal role in this painstaking work of mobilizing people, as Gorringe (2010) describes in his work.

I agree with Alm (2010) that the activists and leaders constantly struggle to maintain the balancing act to stay trustworthy. On the one hand, they need to be good fixers and therefore close to the powerful and part of the electoral politics. On the other, maintaining honesty by staying out of politics and being morally upright is their major advantage over established political parties. Many of the interviewed supporters, leaders and activists offered a lot of thoughts about the perceived need to gain political power in order to change things on the one hand and the deep mistrust towards political leaders on the other.

A very interesting finding is that the activists and leaders constantly struggle with issues of perception, i.e. the tendency that the people see the movement leaders as those who are honest, and the political leaders as those corrupt *but* able to bring change. The trusted and widely admired 'movement leader' of KAA who is perceived not to achieve big change because he was no 'political leader' is one good example of this contradiction, which is in line with Nielsen (2012)'s study (see section 1.2, chapter V). In their constant

interaction with their supporters, the leaders and activists try to define their place between being a political leader and being a movement leader, and even to challenge the power of this distinction. I therefore partly agree with Sahoo (2014), who argues that movement groups have the potential to expand "*the arena of politics beyond the sphere of representational institutions of elections and political parties*" (ibid, 70). However, it is important to consider that the constituencies of these movement groups might not be the most oppressed or underprivileged sections of society in terms of class, caste and gender. Therefore, the non-electoral activities of those movement groups can be understood also as weapons of the strong (expression borrowed from Arora 2001, 91; see section 2.4, chapter IV)[79], just as it is the strong who have the power to resort to such activities. Whereas electoral politics is a sphere, wherein the poor in India tend to increasingly participate (see e.g. Sahoo 2010).

I argue that in the discourses of the activists and leaders, 'being political' or not is very important and those borders are maintained with considerable rhetorical effort. However, in the movement actors' actual practices, the distinction between those parties in power and the many groups and parties that are not seems much more important. This is supported by the tendency of both activists and leaders of groups that are not involved in electoral politics as well as activists and leaders of groups that clearly are involved to use this argument. The movement groups are newly emerging, local or simply lack power in the region and therefore they cannot outdo established parties in terms of their fixing qualities. For this reason, their reputation of honesty becomes their main mobilizing argument.

I started with a discussion of trustworthiness because empirically, this turned out to be the main mobilising factor. However, leadership, as Kakade said, is also about long-term ideas and visions for the future of agriculture in Vidarbha.

[79] Arora here refers to Scott (1985)'s concept of the weapons of the weak as the everyday forms of resistance of the most oppressed and underprivileged.

VI. Visions worth Fighting for

In the last chapters, I have shown that all movement groups talk about the 'agrarian crisis' in Vidarbha and demand a higher price for agricultural products (see section 3.1, chapter IV). However, when one pays more attention to their ideas about how the prices should be constituted or their visions for a way out of the crisis, it turns out that the notion of 'agrarian crisis' is a contested space with different frames of arguments and thoughts. While leadership might be more important for mobilization on the ground, it is important not to limit the analyses to these practices. Eventually, social movements and protests aim at social change or at preventing a certain kind of change. Talking about the visions of movement actors is crucial because they can serve as frames to mobilize supporters at all levels. At the same time, there is also a lively debate on the future of agriculture not only among movements, but in the academic sphere as well (see section 1.1, chapter I). In this context, it is helpful to also understand the visions and ideas of actors on the ground: the leaders, activists and supporters.

In this chapter therefore, I begin by emphasizing the need for new visions of agriculture. Second, I depict the four main frames for the future of agriculture that emerged from the interviews. In the final section, I discuss these frames along two main questions, namely how these frames of arguments relate (a) to current academic and movement debates and (b) to ideas of earlier peasant and famers' movements in the region. Finally, I analyse how these frames influence the movements' strategies of struggle.

1 Framing a Future for Agriculture

In chapter II, I described the notion of the 'agrarian crisis' and how agriculture is perceived as being increasingly unprofitable, although I illustrated the difference between those who see the entire peasantry in crisis and those who see especially the medium, small and marginal farmers as affected by the crisis. This goes to such an extent that Chatterjee (2008a, based on Sanyal 2007) claimed that farmers themselves – particularly the younger generation – believe that there is no future in small scale agriculture and that for the first time the farmers' "*principal motivation seems to be to stop being peasants*" (ibid, 59). According to Sainath (2013), over 2000 farmers per day have stopped being farmers in the last two decades in India as a whole, even though many of them do not find work in the cities of India's jobless growth. Gupta (2005) noted that even if the farmers are protected to some extent by the government, "*their futures are left unplanned*" (ibid, 755). At the same time, Basu (2013) and others argued that the peasantry will persist in the decades to come because "*the consolidation of large-scale capitalist farming and the permanent absorption of surplus labour into the industrial and service sectors seem unlikely in the near future*" (ibid, 379). Today more than half of India's working population depends on agriculture, and the number of small and marginal farmers is actually growing (Lerche 2013; Reddy and Mishra 2010a).

In this context where it seems difficult to imagine a future in and for small-scale agriculture, the movement groups claim to speak for these small and medium farmers and to formulate different visions for the future of agriculture. McMichael (2010, 3)

argued that the "*market and its 'invisible hand' assumptions*" have become the dominant lens through which development is seen, which has led to the "*inability or unwillingness to imagine alternatives to development as we know it*". But even if movement actors do often not have an alternative vision at the ready, they stimulate discussions about alternatives and might be able to change policies and realities on the ground (see also Bebbington 2009). Therefore, movement actors continuously engage in making sense of their present situation and in showing opportunities for change. Within the field of social movement studies, these activities are often analysed using the concept of 'framing'. Intentionally or unintentionally, movement actors deploy different frames in order to influence what seems worth fighting for. Frames are complex interpretative schemata, not just isolated ideas (Oliver and Johnston 2000), and their articulation "*involves the connection and coordination of events, experiences, and strands of one or more ideologies so that they hang together in a relatively integrated and meaningful fashion*" (Snow 2011, 400). Framing can help a movement not only to stimulate and influence discussions, but also to attract supporters or allies and ultimately to reach the movements' goals (Benford 1997; section 1.2, chapter I).

In the field of agriculture, transnational agrarian movements like *La Vía Campesina,* which claims to represent the small farmers of the world, have grown and reshaped the debate over the future of peasant production. *La Vía Campesina* has been crucial to developing and promoting the concept of food sovereignty and is thus credited for having reframed the notion of agricultural development (Desmarais 2002). Such movements influence which visions of a future agriculture are conceived, discussed and eventually put into practice (Borras, Edelmann, and Kay 2008; McMichael 2007). Movements challenge debates over the future of agriculture not only on a global, but also on a local level. Therefore, it is important to engage not only with the ideas of transnational agrarian movements and their intellectuals, but also with the ideas of small, grassroots farmer movements on a local level, as I will do in this chapter.

Therefore, in this chapter, I analyse the different frames of arguments that activists and supporters of the local farmer movement in Vidarbha apply to understand the 'agrarian crisis' and articulate their ideas for the future of agriculture and the peasantry. I argue that while the demands have superficially stayed the same, they have fundamentally changed from challenging the state to challenging the logic of a free market, and that price is a key indicator of this free market. With this focus on price, and the articulation of demands around prices, the movement actors invoke several tensions that they struggle to recognize. In the end, though, the market seems a mysterious force to movement actors, and this makes it difficult for them to organize effective contestations. Consequently, the movement actors address their demands mostly to the state. At the same time, they hardly talk about decision-making and the distribution of power in the government once they would achieve a certain influence.

2 Movement Actors' Four Frames

I found that the interviewees had clear ideas about what was wrong and what needed to change in agriculture. The Grounded Theory method (section 3.3, chapter I) allowed me

to engage with the interview material and develop codes, and later frames and new concepts that I could eventually link to existing concepts about agricultural development. I group the interviewees' statements into four frames, which are generalisations of what I found in the interviews. The frames paint different pictures of the 'agrarian crisis', multifaceted and contesting visions for possible short-term solutions and long-term visions for agricultural production in Vidarbha. In the following sections, I describe the four main frames I found within this movement through the empirical material.

Before coming to the frames, I start with the question whether most farmers' principal motivation is indeed to stop farming. I asked all interviewees what they would do for a living if they had a choice. Would they prefer working in agriculture or in another sector? Would they stay in rural areas to move to the city? And would their preferences change if the prices would be higher? The answers were manifold and did not show a clear trend towards aspirations to stay in agriculture or to move to other sectors. Non-agricultural rural employment though, was not seen as an option. Farmers often mentioned good education and dreams of an easier life – particularly for the younger generation – as advantages of living in city. The advantages of farming were that this was their 'traditional' occupation. The life as a farmer, some argued, was the life of a land owner and that this would make them feel more independent and free. Furthermore, if prices were good, farming would reward them for their hard work. While some farmers brought up these emotional reasons, most answers focused heavily on material concerns. The most common answer was that, if prices were better, they would remain in agriculture, even if only because they saw no realistic opportunities in the city or elsewhere.

The first frame that I will describe is the 'free market'-frame that was mostly deployed by *Shetkari Sanghatana,* a movement that was already past its prime. However, this frame echoed also in interviews with other activists and leaders.

2.1 'Free Market' Frame: "*The Government Should Not Interfere*"

The vision behind these activists' ideas is a free market where technologically advanced farmers can grow whatever the market demands and compete with other farmers all around the world without the need for governmental protection. Sharad Joshi, the leader of *Shetkari Sanghatana,* was convinced that "*if you ask me 'Do Indian kisans stand for economic globalization and liberalization?', I would give a unequivocal 'yes'. Kisans in India are pro freedom*." However, in my own interviews with farmers, no one argued explicitly within this frame. Activists of KAA and SSS sometimes used these arguments, but mostly this was limited to the activists of *Shetkari Sanghatana*. The *Shetkari Sanghatana* made the demand for remunerative prices in the 1980s, and it has always fought against a state-controlled market. After the New Economic Policies in 1991, when agricultural markets were continuously liberalized, the most important demands were fulfilled (see section 1.3, chapter II). One activist of Joshi's *Shetkari Sanghatana* stated that *"Shetkari Sangathana people were satisfied with the prices and no struggles were needed anymore.*"

While this activist of *Shetkari Sangathana* saw no need to fight anymore, activists of other groups argued within this frame but were not yet satisfied. For them, the open market was a promise to prosperity and the current problem of agriculture was that *"the market is not free"* and "*the policies are politicized"*. Tupkar, leader of SSS, clearly said that *"we want a free market. We are able to compete with China and Brazil".* He assured that *"whatever price comes from the world market, kisans are ready to accept"*. But he was convinced that the government *"deliberately depresses the prices"*. Another activist of SSS complained that "*the import and export policies are used like a water tab. Whenever they [the government] feel like, they will close or open it."* With its 'export bans' the federal government can decide to close the borders for a certain crop because of high prices or an expected scarcity. This activist argued that the policies would benefit only the cotton traders and industry. The MSPs were also rejected. Tupkar argued that "*the government should not interfere in our matters. (…) The government should step back and there should be free market. (…) We don't want MSP. As long as the government leaves us in peace, we will accept any price."*

Tupkar in particular sometimes argued in favour of MSPs, sometimes against them. He himself seemed unsure about the free market but explained his belief in free markets with the example of the mobile phone companies. He said that earlier, the government company had a monopoly and the services were very expensive, but with liberalization services had become much cheaper. Only the government company had remained expensive. Therefore he insisted that *"the government has failed us badly. I don't know why, but maybe this free market system will work better for us. We have hope."*

Proponents of what I label as the 'free market' frame acknowledged that farming was particularly unrewarding for small farmers. An activist from *Shetkari Sanghatana* started by arguing that there were no small, medium or big landholders, but farmers were all the same and a better price would support them all. Later, however, this same activist added that *"small kisans can anyway not survive in any system"* and therefore there would be no point in supporting them. In a similar line but with a different conclusion, an activist of KAA argued that despite the low prices, there was no point in telling these farmers to stop growing cotton and soybean. They would do so *"because of the principles of the free market, until you present them a better option. But to do this is not the role of the state. They have to find business themselves."* This, he further explained, was where movement groups (or NGOs) should support the farmers to become competitive.

2.2 'Protection' Frame: "*The Government Should Take Care of the Kisans*"

The 'protection'-frame bundles ideas that the government and the markets are equally responsible for the difficult situation of the farmers and that currently both are failing to provide sufficient incomes in agriculture. Eventually, though, it is the government who must improve the situation and create policies that protect and enable farmers. Pawar, an activist of KAA, dreamed that *"the kisan should be able to stand on his own legs. (…)*

But the government should and must protect us to enable it." This frame is by far the most prominent one articulated by activists from all groups and particularly by farmers.

In this frame, it was important for all activists to emphasize that the unprofitability of farming is not the farmer's fault. Rather, as an activist of AIKS argued, *"in this market economy, kisans can never be saved without the help of the government*". Others did not formulate it that clearly, but in the view of virtually all the interviewees, the problem was that *"the government is not giving the right prices"*. They felt that the MSPs were too low and would not even cover their expenses for farming or everyday life. Therefore, in their opinion, the government should fix the MSP based on the agricultural expenditure of the farmers by taking into consideration individual or region-specific particularities of expenditures and yields. This would imply fundamental changes in the way of calculating the MSPs, as I will show in the following paragraph. Currently, the Commission for Agricultural Costs and Prices considers the cost of production, expected demand and supply, trends in market prices, inter–crop price parity, but also effects on costs of living of the consumers for the calculation of MSPs. The same MSPs are valid all over India (CACP 2013; section 1.2, chapter II).

The demand to consider the differences in expenditure implies three different aspects. First, MSPs should be higher in dry land regions like Vidarbha than in other regions of India. Movement actors often explained that because of the lack of irrigation they are unable to compete with the agriculture of other regions. Many activists, particularly activists of SSS, brought this point forward. Second, an MSP based on expenditure and yields could also entail different MSPs for different farmers within a region, e.g. depending on their access to irrigation facilities. One activist of KAA explicitly demanded different prices for rain-fed and irrigated land because many felt that those who had access to irrigation made a good profit. Third, the uncertainty about the price would have to decrease. Currently, this uncertainty is a major issue for many farmers. *"The kisan depends only on hopes*", a small farmer reasoned. To conclude, to base the MSPs on the individual expenditures or yields of a landholder or on the particularities of a region would mean to change the system for MSP calculation fundamentally. This is what many activists of SSS and KAA and some farmers proposed because, as Suddham Pawar, an activist of KAA, explained, *"each year, we are agitating for a better price for cotton and soybean. We do not succeed. Thus we have to change our strategy. There should be no need to come out [for agitations] every year."*

Apart from a remunerative price, movement actors demanded for schemes for agricultural inputs. First, loan waiver schemes and the availability of loans at low interest rates from the side of the government were considered crucial. Many farmers told me that "*a debt-free life would be my dream."* The activists highlighted that loan policies were biased against rain-fed lands (if a farmer mortgages one acre of land, the amount of loan depends on the productivity of the land and therefore loans are higher for irrigated land). The farmers, particularly the small and marginal ones, expressed their fear of moneylenders and their wish that the government would protect them by giving credit that is easily available and that has flexible due dates. Second, many

farmers dreamt that *"Vidarbha should be green"* and there should be more irrigation. One medium farmer emphasized that *"rain-fed kisans should get water well loans from the bank, and loans for motor pumps. (…) Those with new water wells need water pumps. Those who have irrigation need drip irrigation."* There are other surface irrigation systems still in place in Vidarbha – mostly plenty of small dams – but activists of all groups complained that they are not maintained correctly and therefore do not benefit anyone. So the demands ranged from loans for well construction and better irrigation infrastructure; electricity without load shedding and at subsidized electricity rates; giving water priority for agriculture before the industry, and measures against groundwater depletion. Third, many interviewees complained that fertilizer, pesticides and seeds were sometimes not available, sometimes of very low quality and always far too expensive. Therefore, many farmers expected the government to step in. A few said that there was a need for a separate scheme for the rain-fed farmers that would ensure different prices for inputs together with special guidance about how to apply those inputs best under rain-fed conditions.

The proponents of the 'protection'-frame clearly expected schemes and remunerative prices from the government on the grounds that, as Tiwari, leader of VJAS, put forward, "*there should be a fundamental right of the kisans to have profitability."* On this logic, they rejected packages that are, in contrast to MSPs, one-time payments from the government to farmers in particular situations, e.g. when they suffer from droughts or floods. Many farmers and activists felt that packages are *"like beggary for poor people"* and that the government only tries to *"keep the people quiet."* A medium farmer emphasized that the Vidarbhan farmers *"are not backward. They are hard working. They only want a good price for their yield. Nothing else.*" Only in cases of an accident or old age should the government provide pension schemes, as several farmers and in particular AIKS activists argued for.

Supporters of all groups said that the government should provide special schemes for farmers with landholdings too small to cultivate profitably. This was also supported by many farmers who said that *"those who have money have good yields"*. Jawandhia even suggested redefining the term 'small farmer'. According to his idea, first, one should define how much money a family needs per month to live a decent life and then one should calculate how much irrigated or rain-fed land is needed to earn this money. The ones that have enough land should be considered cultivators and get agricultural subsidies. The others should be considered labourers and get other forms of support like minimum wages or guaranteed employment. This leads to the demands concerning labour.

In contrast to the numerous demands made of the government regarding the needs of cultivators or landowners, when it comes to agricultural labour, most interviewed farmers and activists did not see a need for either a minimum wage or food support. Several farmers said that *"nowadays the labourers are more happy than the kisans"*, because they get their money more regularly than farmers, who get it all at once when they sell their crops. Even a labourer said that "*the situation is very bad for the kisans, so*

therefore labour are getting bhakari [bread] *and chilli only*". While the labourers empathised with the plight of Kisans, activists of all groups as well as medium and big landholders criticised the already existing support for labourers through PDS and the rural employment scheme MGNREGA (see section 2.4, chapter II). Some medium and big landholders as well as activists argued that the food prices were depressed and the labourers got *"lazy"* and stopped working hard.

Unsurprisingly, the labourers, and those marginal and small farmers who depend on labour work, do not share this opinion and mentioned that food had become very expensive. Still, many farmers argued that the prices should increase and not be subsidized. They were convinced that once the prices for agricultural outputs increased, the labourers would *"automatically"* get higher wages from the landowners. In contradiction, the labourers said that the landowners fixed their wages independent of the prices of the crops. One labourer made it clear that *"they [employers] are the ones owning the land, they decide."* The only time when their wages increased was under the condition of scarcity of labour, either due to out-migration or high demand for labour during specific operations such as sowing or harvesting. Or, as another labourer said, *"even when the prices for cotton increase, our wages will stay the same. So how come?"* Only Jawandhia and one activist of AIKS argue that affordable food for the poor is as important as remunerative prices for farmers and therefore that the government needs to fill in the gap. Jawandhia suggested that minimum wages for labour should be included in the calculation of the MSP.

In this frame, all demands were directed towards the government because the government, as one marginal farmer explained, were *"those that look after the budget of the state (…), those who fix our prices."* When trying to negotiate with the government, it was very important to be aware *"on what level what issues can be solved, on what level we should do agitations"*, as Kakade, leader of KAA, emphasized. To fix the MSPs, for example, was a responsibility of the Federal Government and the District Collector could not do anything about it. But a small farmer complained that *"for a normal kisan, it is not possible to reach the high level of government. He can only fight at the district level. And there the government is only giving promises to the kisans."* Lastly, in everybody's opinion without exceptions, the main problem with the government was that most officials and high politicians were assumed to be corrupt. Many activists and farmers were convinced that the traders together with the processing industry have successfully pressured the government to keep the prices low.

The strategies for addressing the government on these issues vary considerably among the groups. Kakade of KAA argued that before making a demand, the activists should think about whether the government would be able to fulfil the demand or not. Their demands, another KAA activist said, should be *"realistic and sustainable"*. Kakade emphasized that *"it is the duty of a movement to preserve the governments' assets and not create any trouble for the public."* On the contrary, some activists and farmers, particularly of SSS, were more decided in their fight against the government, and one

supporter argued that if *"the government only gives promises, we have to change the government. The government should take care of the kisans."*

2.3 'Self-Help' Frame: "*We Need to Help Ourselves*"

This frame is based on the previous one but it adds the assumption that it is nearly impossible to control the government and the market in the short term. A farmer stated that *"the prices are not in our hands and the government exploits us. So the kisan has to take initiative."* Also Kakade reasoned that *"whether we win or lose the battle with the government, we should be our own alternative*." KAA in particular that sees working on local alternatives as an important part of their work (see section 3.1, chapter IV). Pawar of KAA said that the movement group *"has two legs. One 'constructive leg' (…) and one 'political leg' with agitations. So they both can walk together. But because of the constructive leg, kisans will have faith in KAA (…) and we change the thinking of the people. Only through this, change will come, slowly, slowly."*

To start with, two small and semi-medium farmers from KAA and SSS suggested introducing group farming. One of them explained that "*if the trader will come to ask for crops, he must ask the group. The kisans can fix the price then."* Supporters of KAA have already started group farming in the village. Interestingly, an agricultural officer of the government motivated them to take this initiative. All of them cultivate their own land, but they cooperate when buying seeds or other inputs and when selling their crops. Furthermore, activists and supporters of SSS and KAA have spoken about building co-operatives for production, trade and processing in order to increase prices for agricultural outputs as well as to create employment opportunities. In this context, they expressed the hope that if processing and trading were in the hand of farmers, farming would be profitable again. In general, however, interviewees remained critical towards co-operatives due to the experiences in Western Maharashtra. The sugar co-operatives in Western Maharashtra established after independence belong to the co-operatives made up of agricultural producers. They have become an important source of power in Western Maharashtra and have been accused of being corrupt (Lalvani 2008; see section 1.3, chapter III).

KAA has already set two other constructive projects into practice (see section 3.1, chapter IV). Recently, they started the "*Root Milk Project*", which paid a higher milk price to the farmers and guaranteed a high quality of milk for consumers in nearby towns willing to pay a premium. The goal was to foster animal husbandry and eventually increase and stabilize farmers' income. KAA also runs an organic shop through a co-operative, selling local, organic products in a nearby town.

Interestingly, low input farming ideas were mainly framed in terms of 'self-help'. Most activists rejected the word 'organic' because it would imply a *"westernized*" and *"religion-like"* component. So they preferred *"low input"* to refer to agriculture with minimum external inputs. An activist of KAA who founded the organic shop called it *svalambi* agriculture (English: self-dependent agriculture). Activists, particularly of KAA, argued that the farmers could regain their independence when cultivating with low

inputs. If it is not possible to control the output prices and if the yields are still subject to high risks, then the only option is to control the input. This is also reflected in most interviewees' – particularly farmers' – opinions about the genetically modified Bt cotton. One farmer explained that he would not oppose Bt cotton because it would in fact result in high yields (see section 1.2, chapter III), but these high yields can only be realized if a farmer has enough capital to invest heavily in irrigation and inputs. So he opined that because of the high costs and the high risk that would come with that, eventually local seeds would be better.

Picture 8: Organic shop associated with KAA in Wardha

Organic or not, farming needs a lot of knowledge and so, another important 'self-help' activity is training and awareness building. Kakade, leader of KAA, said that *"we need to cultivate the brains of kisans."* The first kind of training is for agricultural practices, the second is awareness building about how policies work and affect farmers. The second point in particular was mentioned often by activists of AIKS and KAA. An activist of KAA said that *"kisans need to be aware how they are exploited by the government policies. (…) If a man is aware, and then he is not fighting, then he is a foolish man."*

But there was also opposition against this 'self-help' frame. For example, Tupkar from SSS was very clear that *"we do not do any constructive work. This is only another way to cheat the kisans. If we make a co-operative, then the people in charge will be again the leaders and will again exploit the kisans for their personal benefit. (…) We want to change the policies."* This directly leads to the fourth frame.

2.4 'Alternatives' Frame: "*Revolution, not Evolution*"[80]

Many activists and some farmers as well argued that it was not enough to demand for slightly different policies, but that there was a need to change agriculture more fundamentally. There are three major areas where change is demanded.

Free Market and Price Determination

Tiwari of VJAS clearly argued against *"free trade, privatization, globalization and liberalization. We want a close-door economy."* For Tiwari and AIKS activists, the New

[80] Often repeated quotation from Tiwari, VJAS.

Economic Policies (see section 1.3, chapter II) were a form of neo-colonialism steered by the International Monetary Fund, the World Bank and the World Trade Organization to exploit poor countries and *"keep them as slaves".* It was very unfair and hypocritical, they never tired of emphasizing, that rich countries subsidize their agriculture but impose subsidy cuts on poor countries. To illustrate this, Jawandhia cited a woman who had once told him that *"it would be better to be a cow in America, than a kisan in India."* But several other activists of all groups pointed out that not only the rich countries benefited from these policies, but also the rich within India. Jawandhia opined that *"the new policies benefit only the already rich. But for the big majority of Indians, this did not change anything. These are only fast dreams. Please stop these fast dreams. Don't make misleading promises to the kisans".*

Tiwari criticized that the Government of India cooperated with and protected the transnational companies, which he saw as detrimental to farmers. The companies had managed to remove all local seeds. After selling their own seeds, the same companies would then sell pesticides and fertilizers and therefore strengthen their market position. Tiwari lamented that *"the farming community, which is living in India has become slaves of companies. The companies decide what products to be sold, what to be cultivated (…). So wrong agrarian practices in India are promoted by the United States, with the help of corrupt law makers in my country."* He even concluded that *"the cotton kisans are nothing but bonded labour on their own fields. They have been working in order to give the profit to manufacturer of the seed, fertilizer and pesticides."* On a more immediate level, many farmers suspected the traders of creating artificial shortages to increase the prices and activists of KAA complained about the unfair conditions and monopolies on the input market, particularly for seeds.

In addition to the difficult situation on the input markets, activists of KAA and SSS argued that the price for agricultural produce is fixed by forces out of the farmers' reach. These activists emphasized that with the New Economic Policies, the price was now decided at the global level. An activist of AIKS emphasized that in a free market, farmers are typical price takers and therefore have no influence over the markets. He further argued that farmers were totally dependent on price as producers and as consumers of inputs as well as of consumer goods and food. The journalist Hardikar even argued that *"it is very obvious that liberal markets do not work in agriculture"* and that neoliberalism brings a power structure of a kind for which suicide seems the only option (see chapter VII) because it is so difficult to fight against those structures. Consequently, farmers saw themselves in a position to neither predict nor control the price and felt a deep unease about the latter. So, most of the farmers argued like the small farmer who demanded that *"the prices should be in the hands of the kisans*".

On the more immediate level of the local economy, many farmers felt threatened and exploited by traders and moneylenders. They perceived traders to have much more power than them. The farmers had to sell their crops directly after harvest due to a lack of storage facilities. Additionally, the traders were often also the moneylenders, forcing the farmers to sell immediately. Consequently, several farmers thought about new

systems for determining prices. One farmer suggested that there should be a market committee consisting of traders and farmers. This committee could then negotiate the price on behalf of all farmers. Other farmers were even yearning for the old times, when the government bought all the cotton from the farmers at fixed prices (see section 2.1, chapter III). An activist of AIKS even suggested a radical change in the system of price determination and wanted to give the government control over prices. He suggested that the government should purchase all the agricultural output and then give prices to farmers according to their needs – namely according to their landholdings. This implies prices that ensure a living also for small and marginal farmers. Along similar lines, a medium farmer demanded that *"if the government does not have any solution for the kisans, they should take our land and give us food and clothes and shelter."*

Cropping Systems in Rain-fed Agriculture

Besides changing market mechanisms and structures, many activists claim that it is necessary to change the cropping system in two major ways. First, they argue that the focus on the production of cash crops like cotton in monoculture increases the farmers' dependency on the market and particularly on its price fluctuations. Cotton is nowadays one of the least-regulated crops in India with hardly any government restrictions. The shift towards cotton together with the decrease of government support and the lack of irrigation in a dry land area had put farmers at an increasing risk. Consequently, Hardikar pointed out that the real question is *"how can rain-fed agriculture go on?".* If the farmers change their cropping pattern and diversify, they could revive local processing and improve their economic situation. This would require a fundamental change in government policies. An activist of KAA explained that the policies incentivize cash crops like cotton and increasingly sugarcane and soybean. Instead, he argued, government should create policies to incentivise more sustainable crops such as sorghum or oilseeds.

This is the second change in cropping patterns that was suggested. Jawandhia, KAA and VJAS activists and Hardikar shared this conviction about sorghum being a huge opportunity for Vidarbha for three major reasons. First, local crops – sorghum in particular – had the potential to improve food security. Tiwari asked *"why should our kisans die to keep you decorated? (…) The kisans should not worry about the world. They are hungry (…). They should go for sustainable crops, food crops, fodder crops."* Second, crops like sorghum or oilseeds can serve as fodder for livestock. The demand to prioritize livestock production was very prevalent among supporters and activists of all groups. Livestock could make agricultural production more sustainable, be an important additional income for farmers and boost local processing industries. Third, crops like sorghum were adapted to rain-fed agriculture and comparably drought-resistant and less dependent on irrigation.

Introducing the third major change demanded, the line here comes again to low input farming. But here, it is framed differently than in the 'self-help' frame, namely as a fundamental alternative to the current farming practices. The goal is to establish a more sustainable farming system adapted to local conditions. For this purpose, 'traditional'

practices should be mixed with new knowledge. One AIKS activist emphasized that "*we have to see scientifically, whether organic farming alone can increase production in a necessary way. Maybe chemicals are also needed.*" Furthermore, several activists deemed it important to find locally adapted farming practices because dry land agriculture and modern technologies in agriculture do not go well together. Most of the farmers who commit suicide, so Tiwari claimed, were *"dry land kisans who have adopted modern genetically engineered agriculture*". On the other hand, low input farming could also help breaking the power of the corporations; some activists labelled it as *"non-corporate"* agriculture. Activists from KAA and VJAS concluded that low input farming could only play a role if there was a consistent policy framework supporting it. However, the government subsidizes chemical agriculture and it is instead the NGOs that are active in promoting low input agriculture.

Most of the farmers were generally positive about low input agriculture. However, many argued that that low input farming was more feasible for the richer farmers. One farmer pointed out that those who got involved were those *"whose economic status is quite good, those that are well educated, who have a good knowledge of the market, the business, the policies, and those who have irrigation facilities."* Along the same lines, Jawandhia analysed that *"these organic people they only talk about the environment, nobody talks about social justice."* He was also highly sceptical of the ideas of organizations like *La Vía Campesina.* He accused them of talking only about communities and natural farming. He argues that *"if we are supposed to become a high cost, developed economy, kisans incomes have to be increased in the same speed. This is only possible with the help of government."*

'Traditional' Community?

Tiwari of VJAS argued strongly against this "*developed economy*" and in favour of the 'traditional' community. He explained that *"for thousands of years, rural economy was flourishing in Vidarbha".* Then during the first Green Revolution, farmers started *"aggressive agriculture"* promoted by private companies. But the major problem in his view was that the cost of living had increased in the village with motorcycles, mobile phones, and ready-made products. In Tiwari's eyes, *"materialism is killing the agrarian community of Vidarbha."* He was convinced that *"this old type of economy never gave higher incomes. But it used to give a sustainable life to the villagers."* Consequently, Tiwari demanded that all these new products, alcohol as well as these *"wrong agricultural practices should be banned."*

Other activists, particularly of SSS and KAA, expressed strong doubts about the desirability of this 'traditional community'. While most shared the concern that the farmers have too eagerly left their 'traditional' farming practices, they also acknowledged that the Green Revolution had boosted agricultural productivity. Furthermore, not everyone was so enthusiastic about the 'local community'. An activist of VJAS saw the problem that *"the people love the money, and not each other. If one person is rich, he will not even give Rs 100 to his neighbour who is starving. Such a mentality is prominently observed here in the village."* Many, particularly small and

medium farmers, objected that the moneylenders and the big landholders were the main problems for the labourers, the marginal, small and medium farmers, particularly their wives and daughters.

The solution for Vidarbha farmers, as Hardikar argued, is neither to go back to traditional practices entirely nor to industrialise agriculture in Vidarbha. Rather, it involves bringing processing industries back to a local level with private and public investment. Most farmers and activists talked about industries connected to agriculture, processing cotton for instance. Only activists of SSS also wished for other industries and Special Economic Zones in their region – *"so change can take place here*", as an activist said.

3 Concluding Thoughts: Fighting for Just Prices?

To conclude, I first discuss how the frames correspond to the ideas of earlier peasant and farmers' movements in the region and how they have changed over time (see section 2.3, chapter IV). Second, I analyse the frames and demands relating them to current academic and movement debates about the future of agriculture (see also section 1.1, chapter I). Third, I discuss how these frames influence the movement's strategies of struggle (see also section 1.2, chapter I).

3.1 From the 'Free Market' to the 'Protection' Frame

The frames that activists and supporters in the movement use most often revolve around the new farmers' movements' demand for a remunerative price (see section 2.3, chapter IV). This demand unites the different groups, activists and particularly farmers, despite all the differences between them. It has its roots in the 1970s, when farmers were obliged to sell their crops to procurement monopolies of the government at a fixed price. At that time, the demand for a remunerative price was directed against government control and in favour of a free market, clearly part of the 'free-market' frame. While it might seem that this demand has stayed the same over the decades, it has in fact changed into its opposite. It is only the old *Shetkari Sanghatana* that still argues within a 'free-market' frame. While AIKS has opposed neoliberal policies throughout its existence; SSS, VJAS and KAA have realized that an open market did not seem to bring the prosperity that they had hoped for. Consequently, in their view, it is now the government that is supposed to protect the farmers from the market and this falls clearly within the 'protection' frame. This indicates not a change in demands, but a shift in frames between the New Farmers' Movements of the 1980s and today.

The 'free market' frame clearly corresponds to a vision for the future of agriculture that is based on neoliberalism. Farmers are conceptualized as independent rural entrepreneurs competing in a market environment. If rural producers get access to markets and these markets become deregulated, the agricultural sector is supposed to become more efficient and the situation of farmers is supposed to improve. Consequently, the recommended policies aim at letting the prices float freely, liberalizing trade and financial markets and fostering the corporatization of agriculture (Braun et al. 2005; Rao 2003). The competitive farmers can prosper while the

uncompetitive ones need to find another livelihood basis, be it as labour on the big farms or in the non-agricultural sector. While this vision is dominant in policy-making bodies (see Oakland Institute 2014), it hardly finds any resonance among movement activists or supporters.

The frame that is most prominent among all groups today is the 'protection' frame. It corresponds to a vision that is still based on the same principles as the 'free market'frame, but which is decidedly different. Sanyal (2007) argued that while there is a dominant discourse about – almost exclusively capitalist – growth, "*there is [at the same time] a growing sense now that certain basic conditions of life must be provided to people everywhere*" (cited in Chatterjee 2008a, 55). In the 'protection' frame, these basic conditions are demanded from the state without questioning the market-led model of agriculture, and only to cushion its effects. Alternatively, the state or NGOs can step into the breach to ensure food and social security or agricultural improvements. While it makes a huge difference whether it is the state or NGOs, both these options are based on the idea that an institution has to step in the breach to protect the farmers. Possible means include different micro-institutions based on market principles such as extension services enabling farmers to diversify or micro forms of collective action (Harriss-White 2008). The frame puts the protection of the livelihoods of marginal to medium farmers as well as agricultural labourers at centre-stage, but it co-exists with a vision of a neoliberal capitalism.

The main reactions from the state then can be understood within this frame. The state's response has mostly been to grant some temporary relief, if at all. The powerful elites have an interest in reacting to the claims of each group separately, rather than to let a more radical resistance grow, as Sahoo (2010, 504 f.) has argued. Chatterjee (2008a) even claimed that the capitalist project in an electoral democracy could not afford to marginalize farmers further because they would otherwise turn into "*dangerous classes*" (ibid, 62). This also implies that, as an outcome of their mobilization, the farmers might get more concessions from the state but that the root causes will hardly change.

3.2 Tension within Demands for Remunerative Prices

Going one step further, I argue that the focus on a higher price raises more fundamental questions. Making this their main demand, movement actors invoke four major tensions, which I will discuss here following. The first contradiction concerns the MSPs. While MSPs typically aim at protecting producers from short-term price drops, what the movement actors ask for is a guaranteed price that covers their expenses in the long-term. The demand for a price guaranteed by the state and considering the farmers' different expenses, yields or even landholdings questions the concept of a free market price more fundamentally than most movement actors realize. Determining the price in that manner would imply changing the market system and would therefore belong to the 'alternative' frame. However, with few exceptions, movement actors keep using the 'protection' frame, asking the government to cushion the effects of the neoliberal policies. Nevertheless, I argue that they implicitly question the mechanisms of price determination by markets in a radical manner.

The second tension concerns the effect of price increases. Whatever the mechanism for the determination of the MSPs might be, a higher price for agricultural output is a double-edged sword for farmers, particularly in a context where many farmers cultivate cash crops. The overwhelming majority of marginal to medium farmers, the groups' constituency, are net-buyers of food (Persaud and Rosen 2003). Therefore, increasing prices for food would have negative impacts on the majority of small and medium farmers, not to mention the labourers. Only for the big landholders, higher prices would lead to an increase in net income. Sharad Joshi of *Shetkari Sanghatana* partly acknowledged this factor and therefore explicitly only demanded higher prices for cash crops, and not for food crops (Arora 2001). In the case of cotton, activists and supporters sometimes made the example that the price of a T-shirt would be very high and the portion that the cotton-growing farmer receives of that would still be very small. This indicates that the conflict was not between farmers and consumers, and that instead it was the traders who caused a high price for the consumers and a low price for the farmers. This argument addresses the second tension to some extent. In the interviews, however, activists strongly emphasized their consequent stand on price to distinguish themselves from political parties, which sometimes favour higher prices, sometimes lower food prices. This is even more unsettling considering the very limited impact of prices on agricultural growth (Ramakumar 2010; Vaidyanathan 2010).

The third tension concerns the fact that guaranteed prices are generally demanded only for agricultural products, but not for agricultural labour in the form of minimum wages. The argument of movement actors goes that the trickle-down from higher prices of agricultural produces to higher salaries for workers would happen automatically. While farmers have a fine sense of power inequalities in input and output markets, most of the interviewees ignore those questions and suddenly seem to trust the market mechanisms – in this case the landowners – when it comes to wages.

A fourth contradiction connected to the last one is the absence of the land question. Most interviewees mentioned that the plots of farmers are becoming smaller (see also section 3.4, chapter II). They agreed that farming could not be profitable for farmers with small plots even with a higher MSP, but that it can be profitable for farmers with larger landholdings. From this perspective, it is striking that land reforms are a non-issue for the small and marginal farmers. Only activists of AIKS complained that the land reforms had not been implemented. Even when I explicitly asked interviewees what they would think about land redistribution, most simply shrugged their shoulders. However, from another angle, farmers who own little land which is only for agricultural cultivation (rather than for selling on), whose land is non-irrigated and who do not have capital to invest in agricultural operations, find themselves with negative profits from their plots. Seen from this perspective, the absence of the demand for land reforms might not be that surprising.

Rich farmers, on the contrary, talked a lot about land and demanded to abolish the land ceiling laws (fixing a ceiling to the amount of land one person can own, see section 1.4, chapter II). Agricultural land still has a significant value. With the appreciation of land

values due to an increased demand for non-agricultural purposes, rich farmers still earn very high amounts in the land market by acquiring land, at times forcibly, from poorer farmers (Parthasarathy 2015, 822-823). In this line, some activists saw trends towards corporate farming. Jawandhia as well as activists of KAA and SSS reported that foreign companies had come to the region wanting land for agricultural plantations or contract farming. An activist stated that *"they have very good technology. So compared to them, our farming will be poor. Many kisans are in stress and sell their land to them"*.

In 2015, land suddenly became the primary issue for all activists. In March 2015, the *Lok Sabha* adopted the Land Bill (i.e. the Right to Fair Compensation and Transparency in Land Acquisition, Rehabilitation and Resettlement (Amendment) Bill 2015). This bill severely cuts the rights of landowners when the government or private entities want to acquire land for industrial corridors or infrastructure projects, including public-private partnerships. Most strikingly, it exempts such projects from the necessary consent of 80 or 70% of landowners (Hindu 2015; Nielsen and Nilsen 2015). Even if, as the journalist Hardikar said, it was often not even necessary to use direct coercion to make farmers sell their land because the economic coercion was enough, it is not surprising that the activists went up on the barricades to fight this bill. This shows the importance of land for rural wealth, or at least what stands between farmers and even more severe poverty (see Li Murray 2010).

These tensions bring us again to the issue of who is affected, or perceived to be affected, by the 'agrarian crisis'. They indeed challenge the idea of a united peasantry that would profit from a measure like a higher price. Ramachandran (2011) showed that within the 'agrarian crisis', the rural groups, regions and crops are very differently affected by recent changes in the agricultural policies. In fact, the rural elite, the big landholders and capitalist farmers, can still have very high returns on investment in agricultural production and therefore a high income from agriculture. It is mostly the small and marginal farmers who suffer from the old agrarian inequalities as well as the New Economic Policies. He argues that it is wrong to conclude that a differentiation of peasantry is decreasing just because immiserisation can be observed (see section 3, chapter II). In fact, inequality in villages is increasing "*and classical processes of peasant differentiation may well still be on-going*" (Lerche 2013, 400; also Le Mons Walker 2008). The most crucial issues are therefore, so these authors argue, to abolish old and new landlordism, redistribute land and "*free the working peasantry and manual workers from their present fetters of unfreedom and drudgery*" (Ramachandran 2011, 79). The movement actors, however, struggle to cope with the tensions that arise from the demand for a higher price.

The case for economic liberalisation contained in the country memorandum of the World Bank for India released in the year 1991 rested heavily on freeing up the agriculture sector. The basic arguments for liberalisation in agriculture can be summarised in following points. Firstly, the pre-1991 economic policy was deemed to be anti-farmer insofar as it kept the terms of trade prevalent in the economy in favour of the industrial sector at the expense of agriculture. This occurred due to the various

protective measures within the economy like input subsidies and output price support, which depressed agriculture prices and consequently created an economic structure based on distorted prices not in line with the cost of production and relative scarcity (see sections 1.3 and 3.1, chapter II). This price argument ('getting the prices right') can be said to be the foundational basis of the neoclassical reorganisation of the underdeveloped economies the world over. Secondly, various policy signals were devised to de-emphasise the role of public investments in agriculture, which again rested on the assumption that the public investments 'crowded out' private enterprise in agriculture. Thirdly, the possibility of an export-led agriculture growth was mooted during this time as a single panacea for the low-income, backward agriculture sector in India. An emphasis on exports would lead to diversification in cropping patterns, and a movement towards 'high value agriculture' would ensure the reversal of the terms of trade in favour of agriculture. Keeping these three main points in mind, it is quite surprising to note that a number of movement actors had internalised the neoliberal re-imagination of agriculture even if they have explicitly demanded state intervention.

Arguably, these tensions immanent in the price demand are symptomatic of the near absence of systemic alternatives that would allow for a fundamental rethinking of the relations of production and consumption. While the groups are successful in elaborating alternatives for their specific issues, namely the low profitability of agriculture, there seems to be no group that can provide a platform to combine a wide range of interests. The political parties mostly fail to do so as well. These characteristics of such movement groups seem to go far beyond India, as Bebbington (2010) has found very similar tendencies in social movement case studies in Peru and South Africa.

3.3 Towards Food Sovereignty

Aiming at a more holistic vision for the future of agriculture, the concept of food sovereignty became well known not so long ago (see section 1.1, chapter I). Proponents of food sovereignty claim to "*hold a mirror to the dominant narrative, both left and right, that views the future of the peasantry through the lens of capital accumulation*" (McMichael 2007, 36) to instead focus on the 'peasant way' of agriculture. They argue that with the industrialization of agriculture, the world market sets the conditions for agricultural production and markets favour transnational agribusiness. This is abetted by neoliberal policy and trade agreements. As a consequence, 'the peasantry' is threatened and dispossessed and needs to unite to fight against the corporate food regime. Food sovereignty seeks to "*offer alternatives to the social and ecological catastrophes of neoliberal capitalism*" (McMichael 2007, 36) by focussing on the development of locally adapted forms of agriculture. The vision is to develop a socially just, environmentally friendly food regime with the peasant community placed at centre stage (Fairbairn 2008; Lerche 2013; McMichael 2006, 2007, 2012; Patel 2006).

In the movement around the 'agrarian crisis' in Western Vidarbha, there are several local initiatives and ideas for resolving the immediate problems that farmers face. Groups that rely on the 'self-help' frame have tried to improve the situation with 'constructive work', including low-input agriculture, group farming and training. They

all closely relate to ideas of the concept of food sovereignty. However, the ideas within the 'self-help' frame are hardly seen as long-term visions by the interviewees, merely as an emergency solution in the absence of support from the state. This goes in line with Bernstein's (2013) argument that food sovereignty focuses on local solutions and fails to present solutions that include the whole economy and not just its agricultural sector. He objected that the narrow focus on traditional, agro-ecological farming practices no longer accepts productivity as a goal and therefore does not have a convincing position towards technology (see Kloppenburg 2008). Furthermore, these approaches fail to present solutions on how a surplus should be achieved and distributed among the non-agricultural population and they compromise the goal of an industrialized economy (Bernstein 2014).

These criticisms, together with the interviewees' perception of those localized approaches rather as an interim solutions point to another critical element in food sovereignty: who is the sovereign (Edelman 2014)? I agree with Bernstein (2013, 21), who says that with all these new visions of agriculture, the state is still "*the elephant in the room*", i.e. an obvious problem no one wants to discuss. Louis (2015) analysed the role of food sovereignty in mitigating the impacts of neoliberal economic policies on poor farmers in Telengana, Andhra Pradesh. She argued that small and marginal farmers face socio-economic constraints, i.e. debt and risk, to adopting food sovereignty practices. In a harsh and monetized economy, these practices based on localized, sustainable, subsistence agriculture would constrain farmers' chances of maintaining their livelihoods viably. She concluded that "*contrary to assertions by advocates that food sovereignty is a precondition to genuine food security, farmers must first have food and livelihood security to exercise true food sovereignty that allows them more control over their livelihoods"* (ibid, 1). This seems to fit very well the perception of the farmers in this study.

In the 'alternative' frame as well, ideas directly relate to the food sovereignty concept. A heavy critique of the neoliberal policies and (transnational) companies go together with localised solutions such as organic farming or locally adapted crops and a vision of more fundamental changes. Here, however, the groups have a different stand on the notion of a peasant community. Food sovereignty has been criticised most prominently by Bernstein (2013, 2014) or Agarwal (2014), while recently also the proponents of food sovereignty have accepted these contradictions as further research needs (; Edelman et al. 2014; Shattuck, Schiavoni, and VanGelder 2015). From a Marxist perspective, Bernstein argued that the notion of the peasant community is a trope of agrarian populism that prominently figures within food sovereignty. First, the category 'peasant' or equally 'farmer' embraces very different groups and classes of farmers on the globe. Second, the focus on 'community' runs the risk of obscuring the tensions within rural society, be it between different classes, generations or gender. In India, though, renowned economist Utsa Patnaik has recently turned towards an analysis closely related to the one of the food sovereignty proponents. She argued that the steeply falling agricultural profitability has hit all agrarian classes in India and has put a halt even to

the rise of capitalist farming. While the big landholders can resort to rent extraction and money lending, the peasantry is left with pauperization. The corporatization of agriculture lets the transnational capital take control over peasant production, leading to an "*imperialist domination of our peasantry*" (Patnaik 2010, cited in Lerche 2013, 390). She, too, argued that all peasant classes need to take up the fight together. She concluded that the solution is that developing countries have to find their own way of industrialization, and preserve and encourage labour-intensive, petty production (Patnaik 2006; 2010, the latter as cited in Lerche 2013). As I will show in the next section, the contradictions between a homogenous versus a heterogeneous peasantry (and related contradictions on suggestions for change) go even further.

3.4 Bridge Between Right and Left

In the Indian context Nanda (2004, 250) argued that the notion of a united peasantry and the ideas of agrarian populism that come with it – and that are arguably also present in the analysis of McMichael and U. Patnaik – can have very real, dangerous consequences. Nanda argued that as a consequence of the indiscriminate use of the anti-imperialist card in the analysis of the agrarian situation, any critique of the indigenous became difficult, "*authenticity and indigenousness and not dispassionate efforts to reach the truth became the criteria of acceptance*" (ibid, 259). This anti-imperialist card closely relates to the urban bias argument (see section 3.1, chapter II) where the colonized and westernized state "*looks down upon the noble traditions and wisdom of Bharat's hardworking farmers becomes the common enemy of the entire village community*" (Nanda 2004, 250). However, this position glosses over differences of class, caste or gender. Such (neo)-populist arguments regard farmers as undifferentiated and oppressed by the state, big business and foreign capital (Brass 1997, 204ff). The formation of this peasant unity is sought to fight against the "*imperialist domination of our peasantry*" (see e.g. Patnaik 2006, cited in Lerche 2013, 390).

This line of argument also draws from the so-called agrarian myth that conceptualises a homogenous, wholesome peasantry consisting of small-scale, de-centralised owner-cultivators embedded in nature and the institution of family. On the one hand the agrarian myth is based upon the farmers' economic identity, which is in turn based on small-scale farming in the village 'community', visions to which new social movements with Gandhian or postmodernist ideas have brought a progressive gloss. On the other hand, the agrarian myth also embraces the farmer's non-economic identity, which is mainly cultural or nationalist (Brass 2000, 15). Therefore, the agrarian myth is defended by mutually reinforcing aspects of "*peasant-ness*", national identity and culture that downgrades class and essentialises the peasantry (Brass 1997, 206). Nanda argued that Hindu nationalists could capture these non-economic identities and "*combine an appeal to the primordial identities of farmers as Hindus with a promise of greater emphasis on the economic interest of the rural sector in the name of promoting cultural authenticity"* (Nanda 2004, 250). In this sense, such arguments have acted as a bridge between the right and left.

Nanda (2004, 253) stressed the strategic importance of this mobilizing ideology of a "*contemporized agrarian myth*" which glosses over deep class and caste divisions. Rich farmers with surplus to sell need such an ideology of presenting an entire village 'community' as a victim of the state. Only in this way, they can obtain support of the majority of poorer farmers and landless workers to pressurize the state for subsidies and higher procurement prices. Nanda (2004, 260) argued that the notion of an urban, modern, mentally colonized 'India' as a whole that exploits rural, non-modern, authentic 'Bharat' would help the message of the religious right resonate with a rural constituency. It is also argued that the New Farmers' Movements in India helped the rise of the Hindu right (see e.g. Brass 1997; Lindberg 1995; Hasan 1998, 107).

3.5 Strategies of Struggles against Mysterious Forces

Another interesting point is how the frames influence the movement groups' strategies and struggles. The actors of the movements around the 'agrarian crisis' in Vidarbha were very engaged in further developing frames to make sense of the situation of farmers and struggled to bring about the change they sought. It was only *Shetkari Sanghatana* that saw their main demand fulfilled and therefore had no reasons left to fight. The other movement actors argued that farming could be profitable if the conditions would be righted, first and foremost through a remunerative price for agricultural outputs. It was a fundamental fear of the farmers in particular, but also the activists, that farmers are not in a position to determine or predict the price themselves. I agree with Chatterjee (2008a) who argued that "*peasants feel that the markets for these commercial crops are manipulated by large mysterious forces that are entirely beyond their control*" (ibid, 61).

One consequence of this perceived powerlessness is that it seems difficult for activists to challenge these forces. In consequence, based on the interviews, I understood that the groups have adopted two different strategies. One strategy, applied by those movement actors who rely more on the 'self-help' frame, was to try establishing 'constructive' activities first to get the peoples' trust. However, these movement actors also acknowledged that in the long term, policies needed to change. Therefore and at a later stage, they sought to build on their successes achieved with 'constructive' activities in order to change prices and other agricultural policies at a higher level. The second strategy worked the other way around. Those movement actors saw the focus on constructive work as an attempt to bedazzle the farmers. They argued that the only way is to change the policies at a high level first. Despite this criticism, they did recognize that they were unable to reach the appropriate levels of the government and often went unheard, as they are put off at lower levels with empty promises.

Another consequence of the perceived mysterious market forces was that both presented strategies eventually aimed at the state. Sahoo (2014) observed this and argues that even though the state is the major actor of engagement for the groups, they are not anti-state. Rather – and particularly so in their self-perception – these groups were in favour of the government, as they asked it to improve its performance (ibid, 70). All groups demanded that the farmers should influence the state in order to change

agricultural policies and, consequently, the market. Considering this, it is surprising how little the interviewees, particularly the activists, discussed decision-making and the distribution of benefits once a certain influence in the state would be achieved. This is particularly striking because many farmers, particularly those with marginal to semi-medium landholdings, did not agree with a notion of a united peasantry implied by agrarian populism. Many farmers argued that agricultural profitability heavily depends on the access to land and capital, and that besides the mysterious market forces, traders and moneylenders still threaten the farmers.

Lutringer (2010), in analysing a farmer movement in Uttar Pradesh, argued that this movement primarily aims at preserving the subsidized agrarian capitalism in which most movement actors are involved. I argue that the situation is different in the case of the movement in Vidarbha. Activists and farmers struggle to make sense of the current situation in agriculture and are at the same time very creative in finding strategies to challenge the seemingly unreachable forces of the market and the state.

One of these strategies, I argue in the next chapter, is to engage in several ways with the farmer suicides to give additional importance to their struggles.

VII. Talking About Farmer Suicides as Movement Activism

The South Korean farmer Lee Kyung Hae stabbed himself 2003 during protests against the World Trade Organization (WTO) Ministerial Conference in Cancùn, Mexico. He was holding a board that said "*WTO kills farmers*". When he died several hours later in the hospital, his fellow protesters celebrated him as a martyr. At the WTO Ministerial Conference in Indonesia, ten years later in 2013, different Asian farmer organizations and *La Vía Campesina* remembered Lee Kyung Hae's death. An Indian farmer said:

> *"We want to remind the world that the WTO kills farmers, just as comrade Lee had done by taking his own life. In India, one farmer commits suicide every half an hour because of the cycle of indebtedness caused by free trade. We demand our governments to stand firm against any attempt to deny small farmers their right to food and livelihoods."* (Via Campesina 2013)

This shows both that the phenomenon of farmers committing suicides has a global dimension reaching far beyond India, and how social movements engage in the debate and use these suicides to draw attention to the desperate situation of farmers in the reality of today's global economic regime. Even if Lee Kyung Hae was South Korean, it is very often India that is cited as an example for the sad phenomenon of farmer suicides. Indian farmer suicides have made their way into many international media[81] where the issue is discussed and the root causes are investigated.

In Indian media as well, the topic is very present, as it is in academic debate. The discourse about farmer suicides is closely linked to the one about the 'agrarian crisis' (see chapter II). Hardly any article about the crisis of agriculture goes without mentioning the suicides as one extreme and very sad expression of rural poverty. Many authors and journalists see it as an "*accurate indicator of problems afflicting the rural economy and society*" (Mohanty 2005, 243). It is very common to directly link it with the government policies and therefore to blame the government for these suicides. When framing farmer suicides that way, they become a powerful argument against the current agricultural policies of the government. Consequently, movement actors engage in many ways with the topic of suicides.

In the first section, I introduce the phenomenon of farmer suicides, on a general global level and then on a specifically Indian one. I use the expression 'phenomenon of farmer suicides' to refer to the particular idea that the incidence of suicides is higher among the farming compared to the non-farming population, and that this difference hints at the farmers' difficult situation. I focus on how the discourse around an epidemic of farmer suicides in India has come into being and how suicides have become 'eligible'. In the second section I analyse the three different lines of argument to explain these farmer suicides and that the two main lines are based on the assumption that the neoliberal policies – the New Economic Policies (see section 1.3, chapter II) – are the root cause. I

[81] There are countless articles in major media from BBC, Al Jazeera, The Guardian (2016a) or New York Times. Further, other authors also noted that (see e.g. Münster 2015, 1581).

particularly focus on how these suicides have become 'public deaths' (Münster 2015a) through these arguments. In the third section, I discuss whether the suicides have become political and could even be seen as a kind of political activism or social movement activity. The fourth section focuses on the empirical data from the movement in Vidarbha and shows that the movement actors engage with the suicides in many different ways. In the fifth section, I contextualize this movements' engagement with the farmer suicides and conclude that the engagement with such suicides has become an important part of activists' repertoire for highlighting the dark sides of neoliberal economic policies.

1 Introducing Farmer Suicides

The phenomenon of farmer suicides is discussed not only in India, but also in other parts of the world, mainly in Australia, China[82] and France[83]. Behere and Bhise (2009) argued that it is in fact a global phenomenon related to the changing conditions of agricultural production (see section 1.1, chapter I; section 1 and 3, chapter VI). In a review about mental health problems of farmers in Europe, USA, Canada and Australia, Fraser et al. (2005) however concluded that there is no convincing evidence that the farming population is disproportionally affected by psychiatric morbidity. Only for some particular groups, i.e. male Australian farmers, is the risk of suicide elevated (Judd et al. 2006).

Whether or not the phenomenon of farmer suicides has any statistical validity, the discourse around this phenomenon is very present in media, academia and among social movement actors. Bryant and Garnham (2014), in their essay about farmer distress within today's corporate agriculture, start their introduction with the observation that

> *"in the international literature farmer stress, mental illness and suicides are socially constructed by dominant discourses as a crisis besetting agricultural communities, largely as a result of economic consequences following drought and climate change (…), agricultural disasters (…) and transition to global, neoliberalised economies. This discursive framework connects structural conditions with farm men by establishing linear connections between economy, financial stress, mental illness and suicide*." (Bryant and Garnham 2014, 304)

This socially constructed discourse about farmer suicides has become a powerful argument, and it has opened up a space to talk about the difficult conditions of many farmers globally under a neoliberal trade regime. Some authors, as I will discuss in section 3.2, even conceptualize these suicides as part of a farmer movement.

[82] In China the explanations differ. It is that women have little support in the village because they moved out of their home village to marry and then the husbands become migrant labourers. The women then have little support in dealing with pressures of motherhood and farming. Many become depressed and commit suicide (Jacka and Sargeson 2011; Watts 2004)

[83] For France, see particularly Bossard et al. (2013) and many newspaper articles (e.g. Le Monde 2013, Lallouët-Geffroy 2016).

Before I come to these aspects, I will describe the statistics for farmer suicides in India and explain why some authors talk about an epidemic. I then shed light on how the statistical category of the farmer suicide has been created and why these numbers are so politically charged.

1.1 An 'Epidemic' of Farmer Suicides in India?

Mishra (2014) evaluated the official statistics on farmer suicides. In India, suicide is categorized as a criminal offense and therefore the data on suicides is recorded by the National Crime Record Bureau (NCRB)[84]. The data on farmer suicides have been recorded since 1995, when the NCRB started to analyse the suicides by professional group (farmers are placed under the category 'self-employed (farming/agriculture)'). Mishra compared the rates of suicide among different professions and clearly identifies a higher risk for suicides among the farming versus the non-farming population – particularly in Maharashtra (see also Nagaraj 2008). In their nationally representative survey about suicide mortality in India, which compared the proportion of suicides and other causes of death, Patel et al. (2012) instead did not find any higher incidence of suicide among farmers.

In the period from 1995 to 2014, 302,116 people in the category 'self-employed (farming/agriculture)' committed suicide in India (Sainath 2015). In 1995-1997, the suicide rate was lower for the farming than for the non-farming population. In the period from 1998 to 2009, this reversed and the rate of farmers committing suicide was higher, highest in 2004 and 2009. In 2010-2012, the rate was again higher in the non-farming population. Because the suicide rates in the non-farming population remained constant over these periods, these comparisons also reflect the development of farmer suicide rates (Mishra 2014).

Mishra argued that the dip in numbers of farmer suicides in the period from 2010-2012 does not reflect the real situation but occurred due to data quality and availability from two states that traditionally had high incidences of suicides. First, many states, in trying to bring down the numbers of farmer suicides in earlier years, started to "*massage the data*" (Prof K. Nagaraj, an economist at the Chennai-based Asian College of Journalism, cited in Sainath 2014). As an example, Rajasthan, West Bengal and Bihar claimed 'zero' farmer suicides in 2014, i.e. that not a single farmer had committed suicide (Sainath 2015). There are two major strategies for lowering the number of farmer suicides. First, tnumbers of suicides in the category 'self-employed (others)' increased just as the ones in the category 'self-employed (farming/agriculture)' decreased. This indicates that farmer suicides are registered as suicides of persons belonging to other professions. Second, the categories for the reasons for suicides have also been shuffled: The category 'other' increasingly included 'sickness' as the cause for suicides. This 'sickness' was in many cases reported to be 'unbearable stomach ache', which then turned out to be farmers who drank pesticides (Sainath 2015). Consequently, Mishra argued that NCRB

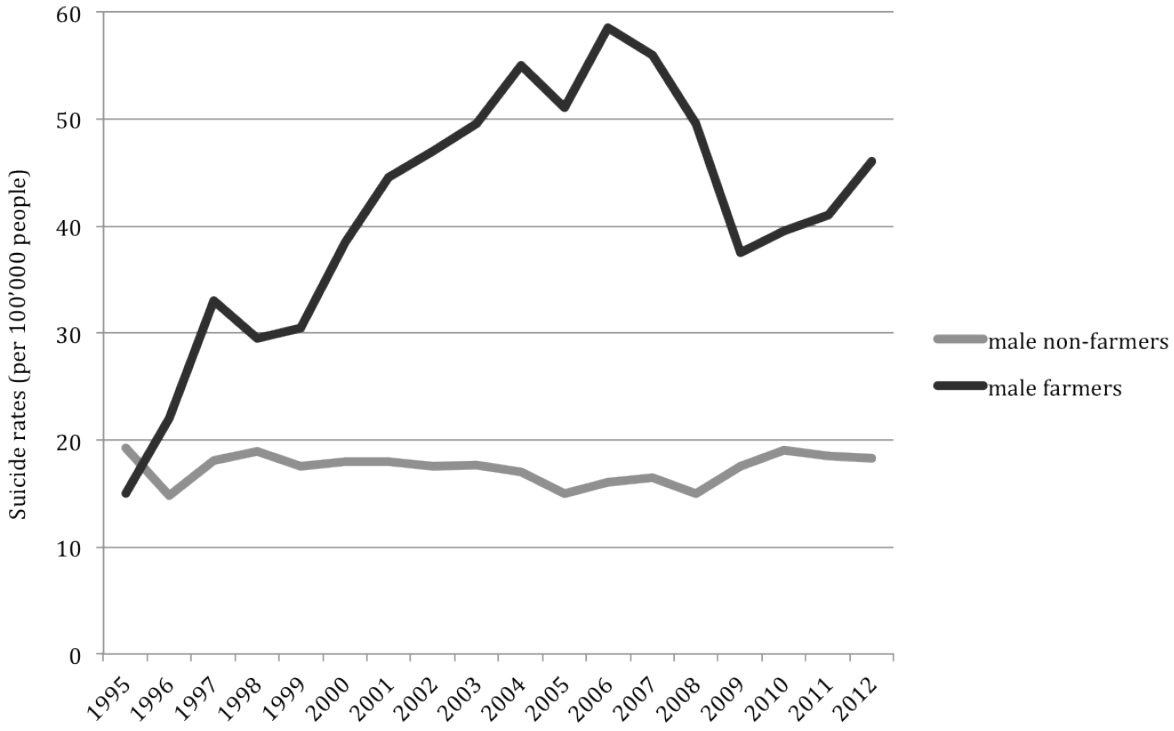
[84] Only in 2001, statistical data started to be included in the decennial Census of India (Münster 2012).

underreported the number of farmer suicides, particularly in the last period between 2010 and 2012. Sainath (2015) also claimed that it was not even possible to work with those numbers, because the NCRB had misclassified the entire category of 'farmers'.

The rates differ greatly among the different states. The 'Big 5' states, Maharashtra, Andhra Pradesh (with Telengana), Karnataka, Chhattisgarh and Madhya Pradesh, are the worst affected, and account for over 90% of all farmer suicides (Sainath 2015). In these states, the suicide rates are higher for the farming than for the non-farming population in all three-year periods since 1995. In Maharashtra, there was a peak in 2006 just before the numbers declined. After 2009 they started climbing again (see figure 3). This is particularly interesting since in Maharashtra – contrary to many other states – the number of cultivators increased in the period 2001-2011. Furthermore, Maharashtra has the highest area under cotton, and cotton farming was often brought into a direct correlation with suicides (Mishra 2014).

Maharashtra alone accounted for over 45% of the total number of farmer suicides in the country in 2014 (Sainath 2015). The state has witnessed the largest number of farmer suicides of all Indian states for twelve years in a row, with over 3,000 farmer suicides in 2013 (Sainath 2014). Vidarbha within Maharashtra is known as one of the 'hotspots' for farmer suicides (Dahat 2014, Behere and Behere 2008; often relying on numbers of VJAS). Frontline reported – based on NCRB numbers – that from 1997 to 2006, Vidarbha had 36,428 cases of farmer suicides. The year 2015 showed the highest numbers of farmer suicides since 2006, namely 1,328 suicides (Katakam 2016).

Figure 3: Suicide rates (suicides per 100,000 people) for male farmers and non-farmers, in Maharashtra, 1995-2012, based on Mishra (2014).



In terms of gender, the farmer suicides appear to be a predominantly male phenomenon. According to official data, more than 80% of the farmers committing suicide are men. The rate of suicide is also higher for the non-farming women population than for women farming-population (Mishra 2014). Indeed, in the papers, articles and discussions about the issue, women generally appear as widows, if at all (Janakiramanan 2014; Kumari 2009). The statistics with regards to women might be highly skewed, though, because women often do not have ownership records and are often not accepted as cultivators or farmers. Therefore, women farmers do not necessarily come into the category of 'self-employed (farming/agriculture)' and their suicides do not count as 'farmer suicides'. As a consequence, as Sainath (2015) observed, the category 'housewives' of the NCRB statistics exploded, particularly in states with a claimed 'zero' farmer suicides. In some states and years, 'housewives', who are often farmers but not recognized as such, make up 70% of the total suicides of women. There might be more to this than statistical issues, however. Some authors have additionally argued that notions of masculinity and honour engrave the risk for suicides and make men more susceptible (see Nilotpal 2011; section 2, this chapter).

When it comes to caste, Mohanty (2005), Menon (2006) and Vasavi (2012, 108) all argued that low caste farmers commit suicides more often (see section 2.2, this chapter). A study about Amravati and Yavatmal districts in Vidarbha indicates that most suicide victims come from middle or non-cultivating castes like *Telis* or *Banjara* (NT) and SCs (Mohanty 2005). Other studies showed different results. Dandekar et al. (2005) analyses that all over Vidarbha and Marathwada suicide numbers spread across all castes but

were highest among OBC and non-Scheduled Castes. Mishra (2006) found OBC, mostly *Kunbis*, and *Banjara* most affected. Here, it is important to note that tenant farmers, very often from the 'traditionally' non-cultivating castes, have often only informal and non-recorded tenancy contracts and are therefore not counted as farmer suicides, although they come under the category of agricultural labour (Sainath 2015).

How all these attempts to numerically and statistically describe, validate or falsify farmer suicides (and therefore the farmers' suffering) by comparing macro level suicide rates of different groups of people exemplifies how politically charged these farmer suicides have become.

1.2 'Eligible' Farmer Suicides

Münster (2012, 181) shows how farmer suicides have "*become reified and visible through the state's enumerative practices. This state-defined category, conveyed and scandalised by the media, rests on a connection between suicide and – an equally reified – 'agrarian crisis'*". These state practices include the production of statistics and the peculiar way in which the state makes a difference between 'real' and 'fake' farmer suicides, where 'real' ones are then eligible for a posthumous compensation payment.

In 2006, the Government of India officially declared certain districts as 'suicide-prone' and issued a bundle of relief packages and inquiry or debt relief commissions (see Münster 2012). In the same year, the Government of Maharashtra and some other states started to guarantee a suicide compensation of Rs 100,000 for the bereaved of a farmer suicide. Therefore, it became important to define what counts as 'farmer suicide' and what does not. The state defined these criteria, and the families of suicides try to prove the 'farmer suicide'-nature of a death case. To discuss these criteria, I rely on newspaper articles (Diggikar 2014; Sainath 2010, 2015) and my own interview data (backed up by Münster 2012).

Three characteristics are relevant for an death case to count officially as a farmer suicide. First, it needs to be proven that it was indeed a suicide and not an accident. Interviewees reported that suicides by drinking poison would be officially counted under 'death by stomach unbearable stomach ache' to keep the numbers low. The bereaved of a farmer who had committed suicide told that the deceased had drunk poison and then jumped down a water well to resolve all doubts that his death could have been an accident. Second, the person needs to be a farmer. That means he needs to own land as well as cultivate it. Nagaraj (2008, 3-4) argued that tenant farmers who lease land and therefore do not have land titles and often only informal and non-recorded land contracts do not count as farmers; nor do farmers cultivating land owned by their fathers. Apart from the problem of land records that I already discussed above, another barrier to classification as 'farmer suicide' is that the reason for the suicide needs to be "problems in agricultural operation and consequential indebtedness". To prove that, farmers reported that the family has to provide all documents pertaining to agricultural production and any outstanding loans. Loans from unofficial moneylenders do not count. However, this is often not enough to prove that there had been no other

major factors that triggered the suicide. Therefore, some farmers left a suicide note declaring that they committed suicide because of the desperate agricultural situation, crop failures or outstanding loans. Sainath (2010) cites a farmer who laughed with graveyard humour that "*now we can't even commit suicide in peace, (…) not without reading those forms the officials have created to see we get it right*."

This distinction between the 'real' and the 'fake' farmer suicides echoes in many discussions among movement actors. Some interviewees believed the compensation would give an incentive for the bereaved to try and prove that it was a farmer suicide even if it was not, i.e. if the reasons were personal in nature, such as problems in marriage, family or alcoholism, or if the death was an accident. In contrast, it was also said that other families would rather try to hide the suicide-nature of a death because of the shame that might come upon the family. These questions are discussed regularly in the local newspapers, many of which have established farmer suicide toll counts on the front page. The – mostly empathic – involvement and reporting of the media is a particularly delicate issue. The regular reporting of suicide statistics and the scandalisation of suicide cases can cause feedback loops among the concerned population, inspire imitators and again increase the suicide rates (the so-called Werther effect, see Münster 2015a, 1585).

This reporting in the media, the practices of the state as well as the practices and discourses of the farmers strongly politicized the farmer suicides, as exemplified by the folowing recent incident. Prime Minister of India, Narendra Modi (BJP), attacked Maharashtra's Chief Minister Sharad Pawar, President of the Nationalist Congress Party, by directly blaming Pawar for the high number of farmer suicides in Maharashtra. Modi said that "*3,700 farmers commit suicide per year because they do not have water or electricity for the crops*" – referring to Pawar's time as Chief Minister of Maharashtra (Bhagwat, Patil, and Phadnis 2014). Modi was silent about the period between 1997 and 1999, when a Shiv Sena-BJP coalition was in power in Maharashtra and when the number of farmer suicides had begun to increase drastically in Maharashtra (Mishra 2014).

Arguably, this politicization has its roots mainly in the perceived causes of farmer suicides in academic as well as public debate. I do not wish judge which of these causes or explanations is more accurate. I want to analyse theses different arguments to show how the farmer suicides have become 'public deaths' (term borrowed from Münster 2015a) through such arguments.

2 Looking for Reasons for Farmer Suicides

It is interesting to note that the importance of the arguments to explain the motivations of suicides differs depending on the geographical contexts. In the case of farmer suicides in India, most studies focus on structural, economic and sociological reasons. Only a few publications focus on psycho-social factors. In contrast, most studies on farmer suicides in Northern countries, particularly Australia and USA, focus on non-structural, psycho-

social factors. A whole body of literature examines the relation of distress and suicide with gendered identities, patriarchal family farming, or cultures of farming masculinity, pride and shame (see e.g. Bryant and Garnham 2014). To my knowledge, there are hardly studies that focus directly on the state's policies and their influence on the suicide rates of farmers.

The papers that I have found on the reasons of farmer suicides in India all agree on a lowest common denominator, which Mishra sharply describes:

> *"The relatively higher incidence of suicides among a particular sub-group of population, (…), are to be identified with socio-economic risk factors that are precipitating in nature. This, however, does not imply the absence of socio-economic ills when suicide incidences are lower or absent." (Mishra 2014, 7)*

Therefore, studies about farmer suicides mostly investigate these precipitating factors. The changes of the agricultural economy as well as the agrarian society since the 1990s are seen as the major reasons, mostly the liberalization of the markets, the withdrawal of the state, and sometimes also the impacts of Green Revolution (see section 1 and 2, chapter II). Within those studies that mostly blame the neoliberal policies, there are two major lines of argument. The first is highly economistic and sees economic disaster as the very direct cause of the farmer suicides; it therefore analyses the economic implication of the neoliberal policies. The second line of argument analyses these implications of neoliberalism on a sociological level. It tries to understand what the new realities mean for the farmers' lifeworlds and what brings so many of them to commit suicide. The sociological line could be seen as a bridge to the third line, which focuses on psycho-social factors. As argued above, this is not very prominent. But still I would like to mention Gyanmudra (2010) who examines the predisposing, "*social and behavioural*" factors (such as age, family history or alcoholism) of farmer suicides and Nilotpal (2011) who focuses on the importance of dignity and honour and a notion of masculinity structuring the processes of macro change[85].

2.1 First Line: Economic Reasons

Arguably, the New Economic Policies affected those farmers most who produced cash crops, positively and negatively. To my knowledge, the different analyses of the phenomenon of farmer suicides show that the majority of the deceased are commercial cash crop cultivators. For the same reason, the suicides are very unequally distributed: mostly in India's Green Revolution states Maharashtra, Karnataka, Punjab, Kerala and Andhra Pradesh and much less in both highly industrialized states such as Tamil Nadu or Gujarat and the poorest states like Bihar or Madhya Pradesh (Kennedy and King 2014; Mishra 2014, 10, 5; Shah 2012, 5-6).

[85] I am aware that there are many extensive debates about the reasons and motivations for suicides, from a psychological, sociological or historical perspective. I surpass them because my argument is not to make a point about the reasons for farmer suicides in India, but to show what the implications of different discussions of them are for social movements.

The regions that are most affected are characterized as ecologically fragile, semi-arid and groundwater dependent and as having a capital-intensive, commercial agriculture (Nilotpal 2011; Vasavi 2012, 103). In these states, there was a shift from low-value food crops to high-value cash crops, mostly grown in monocultures. It is cotton production in particular that is said to 'cause' most of these suicides (Mishra 2006). As I have elaborated in section 2 of chapter II, this commercialized farming has brought an increasing dependence of farmers on external inputs and. Together with the low and fluctuating prices for those crops, this has driven many farmers into indebtedness. These tropes of the 'agrarian crisis' are widely brought forward as being the main reasons for farmers to commit suicide (see e.g. Dandekar et al. 2005; Dongre and Deshmukh 2010; Mishra et al. 2006).

While there is abundant evidence that the commercial farmers constitute the largest segment of suicide victims, there is less consensus about which groups of farmers have the highest suicide rates among the cash crop producers. Shah (2012, 17-18) argued that most of the suicides are small and medium farmers who are dominant in the agrarian structure, have already profited from the benefits of the Green Revolution and do have a political voice. The reason for the suicides is then, so she claimed, not a real scarcity of food, but the fear of pauperisation, impoverishment and humiliation. Many other authors instead emphasized that small and marginal cash crop producers are most likely to become indebted and to commit suicide (Kennedy and King 2014, 2; Mishra 2014, 10; Mohanakumar and Sharma 2006, 1557; for Maharashtra in particular see Mohanty 2005, 267). Indeed indebtedness is found to be the most important reason for suicides, particularly for farmers with small or marginal landholdings (Kennedy and King 2014, 4).

2.2 Second Line: Sociological Reasons

Because indebtedness is such an important factor, Vasavi (2012, 73 ff) pointed out that for commercial farmers in particular, the nature of the risk has changed in five ways. First, the neoliberal developments together with the Green Revolution changed the nature of agricultural risk. The market risk increased because of the fluctuating, less supported price of agricultural in- and output. Second, the ecological risk augmented caused by the increased irrigation, the use of chemical fertilizers as well as climate change, i.e. the tremendous effect of a greater variability in quantity and timing of rainfall on rain-fed agriculture (see section 2.5, chapter II; 2.2 in chapter III). Third, production increasingly relies on water-intense high yield variety crops, which have increased the production risks. Fourth, it has become more and more difficult to access capital and farmers have to rely on moneylenders. Fifth, the knowledge required for agriculture changed. The new agricultural crops, so Vasavi argued, need new knowledge, but the farmers still rely on their 'traditional' knowledge. Gupta (2016) called this a 'speculative climate'. What makes these risks unbearable for farmers and in the end a reason for suicide is the 'individualization' of those risks, which I will elaborate in the following.

Many authors argued that not only the nature of risk, but farming as a whole has changed as a consequence of the Green Revolution and the New Economic Policies (see section 1, chapter II). These studies mostly relate to work on the root causes of suicides (Durkheim 1952). Durkheim described suicides as related to a specific combination of social and economic reasons, assuming that suicide rates correspond to changes in the society. Mohanty (2005) has completed a detailed study of farmer suicides in Vidarbha in which he directly relied on Durkheim. In the case of cotton producers in Maharashtra, Mohanty argued, this combination is that the low and middle caste farmers are trapped between the aspirations evoked since 1947 (through the promised land reforms, the Green Revolution and the market liberalization) and the reality of neoliberalism (Mohanty 2005, 267). Now farmers experience an individualization of risk, decision-making and success that leaves them more vulnerable to suicide (Mohanty 2005; Vasavi 2009). This process has several dimensions.

Before the 1950s, the agrarian system was highly hierarchical with caste-based allocation of land and resources. But "*agriculture was conducted on a pattern that was based on collectively shared knowledge forms*" (Vasavi 2009, 99). Then, the practices of agriculture, the "*meaning and significance of agricultural activities*" (ibid) changed, while the caste-based structures as a social basis of production have largely remained (Harriss-White 2004). During the period of Green Revolution and later the New Economic Policies, when commercial agriculture became more widespread, "*support and sustenance that could have been provided during times of crisis under the patron-client systems have disintegrated*" (Vasavi 2009, 100) and the dependence on external, often state-based structures increased. Vasavi emphasized that this has liberated the working, low-ranked castes and groups and enabled them to escape the hierarchical, oppressive structures. However, the state mechanism of provision was unable to compensate the older provision mechanisms (Vasavi 2009, 2012). Related to that, extended families developed into separate nuclear families, which further weakened the familial sources of sharing, support and decision-making. It was then the burden of the head of the household to make a living for the family increased. The decisions on agricultural operations – and therefore the risks – lie on the shoulders of one single person (Vasavi 2012, 118).

At the same time, Vasavi (2012, 108) as well as Mohanty (2005) argued that the composition of the peasantry changed in the 1980s, when the traditionally landed, higher-caste farmers who gained the most from the first wave of Green Revolution left agriculture and found sources of economic wealth outside agriculture . Then, farmers from earlier non-cultivating castes started (commercial) farming and became marginal, small or even medium farmers in the 1980s and 1990s. Jodhka (2005, 25) as well as Vasavi (2012) argue that particularly these new farmers became autonomous from traditional structures of patronage and loyalty. These structures, however, apart from the many forms of oppression associated with them, also entailed that farmers could rely on a shared corpus of knowledge as well as a net of social relations (see above). 'New' farmers could not rely on such structures, while the prejudices and the

discrimination from the upper caste against lower caste farmers remained. This isolates low caste, 'new' farmers even more. Both Vasavi (2012) as well as Mohanty (2005, 243, in particular for Maharashtra) argue that these 'new', small and marginal commercial farmers are the ones that commit suicide most often. This is backed up by the study of Menon (2006) who shows that 46% of suicides belong to OBCs, 42% to SC (for Telengana). It is thus not the entire class of 'peasantry' that is uniformly affected as concerns farmer suicides; instead, these 'new', small, marginal or semi-medium farmers are particularly at risk of becoming indebted and committing suicide.

This shows that the old structures of caste and class are still rigid despite the changes in the agrarian economy. It is not that the 'old' structures would be replaced by the 'new,' rather that the new developments interact with the old social, political and caste structures (Vasavi 2012). The individualization of risk and the isolation on an economic level does stand in sharp contradiction with the social pressure and stigmas in the social and private sphere. Vasavi argues that new demands of consumer-defined lifestyles and commercialisation of the social life together with the sanskritization and the consolidation of rituals as lifestyles show that pre-existing and new forms of collective norms and obligations merge and mount immense pressure on farmers. These newly emerging contradictions ultimately lead to suicides (Vasavi 2009, 101-102).

Lastly, the ideational nature of neoliberalism is important to understanding the individualisation of farming. Following Beck and Beck-Gernsheim (2001), Vasavi argues that neoliberal policies have brought a "*do-it-yourself biography*" (Vasavi 2009, 101-102). This means that with the withdrawal of state support and the assumption that everything is possible if farmers are only entrepreneurial enough, their biographies are under a permanent threat – overt or concealed – of breakdown. Within the environment of commercial agriculture, the state's withdrawal and unreliable climatic conditions, farmers face unpredictable output prices and an unreliable quality and quantity of inputs. They also have to decide on new, untested agricultural practices. Thus, they are unable to gauge the risk involved. They have to seek knowledge, inputs, credit and market access on an individual basis and rely on the small structures of their households and families. Additionally, many are heavily indebted with moneylenders or their extended family. A crop failure means public humiliation because the debtors are not able to repay their debts. Farmers perceive that they are to be blamed personally for the loss and its impact on the family's wellbeing. As a consequence, a crop failure can mean a drastic individual failure and shame for the farmer (see also Mohanty 2005, 263).

What applies here to risks applies equally to aspirations. Shah (2012, 18) states that the Green Revolution and later the market liberalization has "*coded the farmers choices and aspirations*". The limitless optimism that came with these two developments stands in sharp contrast with the reality of many farmers. The farmer perceives his future to be full of opportunities that he then failed to seize. This situation helps cause a jump in suicide numbers (see also Gupta 2016).

2.3 Farmer Suicides as Public Deaths

In India, these three different arguments often – implicitly or explicitly – criticize each other. Even if the economic and the sociological lines both see the neoliberal policies as the root causes, they differ in where they locate agency. The arguments that focus strongly on the material effects of the New Economic Policies leave all agency with a state that lets farmers live or die. In consequence, these studies do not put much emphasize on the agency of the persons committing suicide or on their individual motives (see also Münster 2015a, 1581 and 1587). Therefore, the proponents of the sociological approaches accuse the others of being economically reductionist (ibid, 1589).

There are countless examples of the economic – that is, more structuralist – understanding of the farmer suicides. One is Mohanakumar and Sharma (2006, 1553) who strongly argue that "*the on-going spate of farmers' suicides is caused basically due to economic distress rather than psychological and social reasons*". This, arguably economically reductionist approach is also exemplified by the debate over whether or not Bt cotton causes farmers to commit suicide (see e.g. Gruère and Sengupta 2011; Gutierrez et al. 2015; Herring 2005). Some even refer to Bt cotton's 'seeds of suicide' (Shiva et al. 2002). While one side argues that the suicides are a consequence of "*corporate feudalism*" and see a direct link between the suicides and these corporate actors together with Genetic Modification technology (GM) in particular, the other side calls this whole argument a "*hoax*" (Herring 2006, 468). In any case, this argument is so powerful that one of these transnational corporations, Monsanto, has created a webpage trying to prove that they are not responsible for the suicides (Monsanto 2014). While these rather technocratic debates about GM-crops or the Green Revolution as causes for the suicides are important, the argument that the major cause are the state's neoliberal policies is omnipresent.

To give a more nuanced analysis of the reasons that lead farmers to commit suicide, the sociological line of argument conceptualizes suicides as a relational act seeking to convey meaning (Vasavi 2012). It acknowledges that even in desperate economic situations, the farmers can choose between different options, suicide being one among them. This implies to give the farmers a higher agency and to consider other reasons that would bring the farmers to the decision to commit suicide. But those authors from the economic line of arguments who see a direct line between neoliberal policies and suicides claim that looking for other reasons is dangerous, because it is crucial to highlight the structural violence of globalization and neoliberalization of the agricultural policies. Mohanakumar and Sharma (2006, 1558) for example strongly argued that

> *"recently, there have been attempts to situate farmers' suicides in broad theoretical frameworks such as Family Stress Models and Durkheim propositions of individualisation [here he refers directly to Gyanmudra and Mohanty] with a purposeful objective of belittling the devastating impact of neoliberal policies on farming community."*

Despite these differences and to my knowledge, all studies that act on the basic assumption that farmer suicides as a phenomenon exist, agree on the basic assumption

that the neoliberal policies of the 1990s are a major factor causing the farmer suicides. Even the reports and fact-finding commissions of the government itself do not deviate from this assumption. One report for Maharashtra, for example, argued that

> *"repeated crop failures, inability to meet the rising cost of cultivation, and indebtedness seem to create a situation that forces farmers to commit suicide. However, not all farmers facing these conditions commit suicide — it is only those who seem to have felt that they have exhausted all avenues of securing support have taken their lives"* (Dandekar et al. 2005, iii-iv).

So far, this is the state's analysis of the discussion of the reasons for farmer suicides. It turned out that it is a common argument in academic and political debates to draw a direct or indirect relation between the package of New Economic Policies (and at times agricultural practices). Because it is the government that has issued these policies or allowed these practices, the government is consequently responsible for the suicides.

Additionally, I showed in the last section how the suicides have become politicized through blame-games and statistical trickery. As a consequence, the nature of farmer suicides has changed. While it used to be an individual act within the anonymity of the family, they have now become highly politicized and therefore 'public deaths' (see also Münster 2015a; Vasavi 2012, 192). It is important to note, that this political, public nature of the suicides does not derive from the intentions of the individual farmer for committing suicide, but from all the reasons analysed above. To come to such a conclusion means to "*turn away from the intentions of individual actors and instead focus attention on the aggregate effects*" (Münster 2015a, 1605) of these suicides. This turn away from an individual farmer's intentions could be interpreted as a denial of his or her political agency. But I agree with Münster (2015a, 1605), who argues that on the contrary, to conceptualize farmer suicides as public *"is an acknowledgment of the political potential of seemingly apolitical acts*".

But are these suicides really "*seemingly apolitical acts*" in the first place, i.e. in the intentions of the farmers who commit suicide? Several authors have conceptualised the suicides as a political action in itself or at least as part of a movement.

3 Framing Suicides as Part of Activism

In India, farmer suicides can be understood in a context of different, rather desperate forms of protests among farmers. It started with people who placed their own villages "*for sale*" as a form of protest. The farmers claimed that if agriculture was so unprofitable, they would prefer selling their village and moving to cities (own interview data, Vasavi 2009). Later, Sharma (2006) reported on his blog that in Punjab, a whole village had put itself for sale by calling the Prime Minister and the President to conduct a human market and to sell the farmers' kidneys. Sadly, such forms of protest have found a combination with increasing incidences of organ trafficking. The Times of India featured a report about a similar protest in a Vidarbhan village. People hanged a banner with "*Farmers' kidney sale centre*" at their gate – and claimed to invite high-ranking

politicians to the inauguration. Bhagwat writes in *The Times of India* that because indebted farmers are "*unable to find an avenue to eke out a living, (...) farmers of the village have decided to sell their kidneys*" – and then he draws a direct line to the high number of farmer suicides in the district (Bhagwat 2006).

3.1 Suicides as a Political Act

In this context, some authors and journalists have reported on an increasing number of cases where farmers directly address the government in their suicide notes – the Chief Minister of Maharashtra or even the Prime Minister of India – with demands for support and remunerative prices (I have also been told about such cases). Sometimes, farmers even sought the politically charged method of self-immolation in or in front of government buildings. While this seems rather rare, several journalists have reported about numerous farmers who had chosen public places such as the Agricultural Produce Marketing Committee office or the office of agricultural officer to kill themselves (Abraham 2015, 18; Münster 2015a; Sainath 2007, 14).

These clearly and explicitly political farmer suicides are rather exceptional cases. More generally, the aspect of political protest of farmer suicides does not derive from an "*element of resistance innate to individual acts*", but by the "*sheer number of farmers' suicides"* (Münster 2015a, 1605) and by the fact that the farmers who commit or think of committing suicide know that they are part of 'the farmer suicides' (Münster 2012, 198; Münster 2015b). This also implies that the vast majority of farmer suicides are not protest suicides in a narrow sense: Münster (2015a, 1593) distinguished farmer suicides clearly from protest suicides because for the former, the will or intention to convey a political message in the public sphere is not the primary motivation for committing suicide.

Nevertheless, whether or not the suicides are explicitly political, they can be conceptualized "*as communicative acts that intend to do more than just end a life: they convey a message of despair and protest and, therefore, a political message*" (Münster 2012, 198). Münster (2012, 197) observed that in some reports and articles about farmer suicides, they have been "*understood as subaltern anti-WTO protests and so have been treated in a direct sense as political: farmers' suicides as political protest.*" At the very least, farmer suicides can "*open up a space to speak publicly about the violence and disappointments of the neoliberal dispensation*"(Münster 2015a, 1605) and thus they have politicized farmers. Vasavi (2009, 104) makes it more explicit when she says that the suicides are "*the last act of the desperate to speak in a political voice*''.

To speak in a political voice has become increasingly difficult in times when the neoliberal paradigm of development has become very dominant. McMichael (2010) claimed that "*by* politicizing *market culture, and its material consequences"* (ibid, 4, emphasis in original) numerous, diverse and local struggles all over the world manage to challenge this dominant development vision, difficult as thus may be. He further argued that the challenge of social movements today is to make the diverse sufferings of people visible, which would otherwise "*be made invisible by the disempowerment of the*

people concerned" (ibid, 4). Consequently, social movements need to find strong arguments to overcome this challenge and make their struggles visible. The use of the discourse about farmer suicide can then be seen as one tactic to draw attention to the difficult situation of smallholders in commercial agriculture and make their grief tangible, even if alternative visions are difficult to find. It is in this context, where Münster (2012) framed farmer suicides as "*part of the activists' repertoire of depicting India's bestiary of the underside of globalization*" (ibid, 198). As I will show later, this discussion helps to understand the role that farmer suicides play in mobilisation in Vidarbha.

3.2 Suicides as a "Silent Movement"

I argue that it is important to conceptualize these suicides at least as part of a social protest, because it breaks with the main argument of most papers that take agency away from the farmers. It opens the stage for the question whether the suicide should be seen as a breakdown and absence of farmer protest or rather, as a new, though tragic, form of farmer movement, or as one important part of contemporary farmer movements' repertoire. So, what is the relationship between the previous farmer movements and these farmer suicides?

Shah (2012, 5) argued that the farmers who commit suicide are the very farmers who formed the constituency of the New Farmers' Movements, namely the commercial farmers. Their anger, she argues, has shifted from corrupt bureaucrats, merchants and the local level administration to the state per se. By emphasizing rural vulnerability and mixing it with the landed farmers' issues and their argumentation of the urban bias, the persisting, contemporary factions of the New Farmers' Movements have now found an "*emotionally authentic voice*" (Shah 2012, 6). Other authors might disagree. Münster (2012, 199) argued that suicides often did not take an active part in farmer movements. I have argued in section 2.3 of chapter IV that the constituency of the New Farmers' Movements were rather landed, medium or large commercial farmers (for Maharashtra see e.g. Arora 2001). Further above in the last section, I showed that a majority of studies and reports suggest that it is now rather the marginal, small and medium commercial farmers who commit suicide (see e.g. Kennedy and King 2014; Mishra 2014). Therefore, the argument that the constituency of the New Farmers' Movements of the 1970s and 1980s are those farmers who are now committing suicide stands on shaky ground. Certainly, though, both these groups were farmers who owned at least some land for commercial production and were not in the economically lowest strata of the rural society.

However, the suicides themselves are increasingly conceptualized as a successor of earlier forms of movements and as a more or less political public action by farmers to call attention to the situation of agriculture. Shah (2012, 18) argued that the suicides are caused by a crisis of a lack of alternative forms of political and cultural imaginations, which links back to McMichael (2010). This implies that the suicides might not be a movement themselves, but that they are still conceptualized as a phenomenon or a discourse that can be seen in one line with earlier struggles of farmers; now that farmer

movements have become weak, farmers commit suicide. In this context, the Vidarbha based journalist Chandrakanth Wankhade called the farmer suicides a new "*silent movement*" of farmers (Wankhade 2010, interview data).

The intense debates in academic as well as activist circles show that farmer suicides are now a highly politicized public issue and that they have become part of the repertoire of the contemporary farmer movements. As I mentioned in the beginning of this chapter, journalists and activists all over the world use this issue in India to emphasize the grief that the neoliberal economic policies and the Green Revolution practices of industrialized agriculture have caused for farmers in the global South. By doing so, they draw on many local farmer movements in India who engage with farmer suicides in many ways. In the following section, I show how the movement around the 'agrarian crisis' in Vidarbha engages with those farmer suicides in various ways; they provide support, encouragement and last but not least, they use of the discourse of farmer suicides to prove the farmers' suffering and the government's guilt.

4 Voices of Movement Actors: "*Don't Kill Yourself, but Fight*"

In the following section, I analyse first how the interviewees themselves interpreted the farmer suicides. The concurrence among the interviewees was very high with regards to these reasons, and this also corresponds well with the literature discussed above. Stemming from the perceived reasons, the responsible persons and institutions were very bluntly named in many interviews. I then explore how the groups engaged with the issue of farmer suicides.

4.1 Perceived Reasons for Suicides

The most important reason and often the immediate trigger for the decision to commit suicide, many interviewees agreed, was indebtedness. Many farmers – and in particular many activists – regretted the time when the government had provided loans for the farmers. The journalist Wankhade particularly emphasized that "*in older times, he [the farmer] was indebted, but he had other assets. Over the last decades, slowly, he lost all this, a slow degradation. Now, he has lost everything and has nothing to sell. (…) That is why they [farmers] commit suicide.*" An activist of AIKS explained that often land was the only collateral the farmers could offer, which drew them deeper and deeper into the debt trap. But most importantly, if the farmers were unable to repay their loans, the moneylenders would come to the farmers' homes to threaten and humiliate them. The moneylenders' perceived thuggery was, many interviewees believed, often the straw that broke the camel's back. A supporter of SSS underscored that "*for the kisans, the visit of the moneylender feels like an insult. That is why they commit suicide.*"

While everybody agreed that indebtedness was always a reason and often a trigger to commit suicide, there were two main lines of arguments to explain why farmers became indebted and why they then chose to commit suicide. A minority of interviewees argued that the farmers were weak and isolated. The majority of people argued that, to the contrary, agricultural operations were the reason for those suicides and they clearly

identified the culprits. These two arguments broadly correspond to those lines in the academic debate, i.e. economic and sociological, that I have outlined in the last chapters.

Weak and Isolated

A minority of interviewees blamed the farmers' personal weaknesses. Interestingly, this opinion came up often as well in informal discussions with people in cities, far removed from agriculture. The interviewees argued that the farmers who decided to commit suicide were "*weak*" individuals. Either they were lazy and would not farm properly, or they were drunkards. Activists in particular, though, considered this accusation as an insult. If it was true that alcohol was the reason, an SSS activist exemplified, "*then the people in Bollywood, the people in the expensive hotels, they all would also have to commit suicide*." Others further argued that it was indeed true that many farmers who committed suicide were addicted to alcohol, but as an AIKS activist objected, it was important to talk about "*why the kisan is in such problem*".

Similar but crucially different is the argument that the farmers were only weak but also received very little support from their families. The farmers felt responsible but unable to provide for the family's needs, most often the dowries for the family's daughters or a disease of the farmer himself or a close family member. A supporter of KAA reasoned that "*the kisan is responsible for the whole family. He cannot provide for them, cannot do anything, not repay the loans. So he decides to commit suicide.*" In this situation, farmers feel lonely and isolated by their problems and see no other way out than to commit suicide. A supporter of AIKS criticised that there was a "*lack of interaction among the kisans*". They go to their fields and don't discuss their problems with anyone. Only those farmers without family or friends to encourage them commit suicide. Additionally, an activist of SSS argued that the "*kisans are devalued in the village and therefore commit suicide*".

As mentioned, only a minority of interviewees brought forward personal weakness and also isolation to explain farmer suicides. The majority in surprising accordance blamed the government for the deaths of the farmers.

The Government's Fault

I showed in chapter II and VI that most farmers blame the government for the low prices for their output. Consequently, most interviewees claimed outright, that farmers decide to commit suicide because agriculture is no longer profitable anymore, given the low prices. One mother, whose son had committed suicide recently, said that "*he had committed suicide due to low income of agriculture. He jumped into a water well and drank poison. The reason was agriculture only."*

Most often the interviewees directly blamed the government. Sometimes, they blamed the government in general, sometimes the Congress (see section 2.1, chapter IV) in particular. Several supporters of SSS emphasized that "*the Congress is responsible for this whole situation.*" Countless times, interviewees made similar statements as the one of an AIKS activist: "*Because of the bad government policies, there is no price, kisans cannot repay the loans. They face the moneylenders and agricultural problems. The kisans loose*

their wish to live. This means that the state government is fully responsible for the kisan suicides." Also the leader of SSS clearly said that "*the policies are anti-kisan. That is why they commit suicide*." And a supporter of KAA added that "*the government says that 'we'll give you good rates'. But they tell this since more than sixty years. They tell this once and then they hide away for five years. Because of that, kisans commit suicide."*

The government responded to these accusations, as mentioned above, by granting compensation payments for the bereaved of those farmers who committed 'farmer suicides'. The family members often said that they did get the compensation – often with the help of activists – and they could use the money to build a well or then to pay their debts. A farmer whose father had committed suicide, reported that after the suicide, the Revenue Officer came to the village to enquire whether or not the suicide was an eligible farmer suicide. For that case, the father had written a suicide note stating that he committed suicide only because of agricultural problems. After the Revenue Officer checked the respective documents about debts and agricultural records, the family received the compensation, and the family was able to build a water well. However, the son complained that "*if the government had given a water well to my family before, then there was no need for my father to commit suicide.*"

Some supporters and particularly activists were enraged that some journalists or politicians would accuse the farmers of committing suicide only to get compensation. This idea was strongly rejected by all the interviewees. Often, interviewees suggested offering Rs 100,000 to rich people to see if they would kill themselves. Kakade, leader of KAA, stated that "*everybody wants to live. Nobody is ready to die for one lakh [100,000] rupees*." Further, several supporters argued that Rs 100'000 might be a support for the bereaved, but it would never solve the family's problems. The family would instead be worse off after the suicide of one of its members. A supporter of SSS, however, accepted all those reasons but blamed the farmers because "*they are not thinking about who will take care of the family after him.*"

Some activists argued directly that the suicides had started as a consequence of the New Economic Policies in the early 1990s. Jawandhia for example claimed that the farmer suicides started in the 1990s, because the gap between urban and rural India had widened after the New Economic Policies in 1991. Free trade had failed Indian agriculture, Jawandhia argued: "*this could be seen in the last twenty years with these kisan suicides.*" The argument went that the farmers were crushed by the markets without the help of the government. *"The market uses the kisans forcefully, that is why the kisans commit suicide",* a supporter of AIKS said.

Consequently, activists of SSS and VJAS – particularly Tiwari – blamed the international institutions like the WTO or then the U.S.A. He accused "*the government and the international community*", "*America and their friends*" to "*let these people die*" and therefore "*commit mass genocide*". The U.S.A., so he said, knowingly let the farmers of the poor countries die "*for the sake of their own kisans*". Rathod, activist of VJAS, claimed that the seed companies, together with the government, would promote wrong agricultural practices, including genetically modified crops, and therefore cause the

farmer suicides. Also organic cotton, so Tiwari claimed, was only a *"European fantasy"* and "*Indian kisans die just for healthy clothes for the Europeans*."

It is very clear for most of the supporters and particularly most of the activists that there are people directly responsible for driving farmers to suicide. Consequently, the suicides constituted an integral part of the groups' activities. To name an example, Tupkar, the leader of SSS, said that the high number of farmer suicides had been the direct reason for SSS to expand its activities to Vidarbha. Tupkar said, SSS would now fight for those farmers. A supporter of SSS also said that he would fight "*for that the kisans don't kill themselves, for that they are working*."

There is, however, another factor that – in the opinion of many interviewees – constitutes a cause for farmers to commit suicide: the unreliability of rains (see section 3.2, chapter III). The farmers in dry land areas like Vidarbha depend on the rains and any variability in the timing and amount of precipitation causes crop failures and makes it impossible to repay their loans. So, farmers often said that *"nature and government"* are not in favour of farmers and would bring them to commit suicide.

In the next section, I will analyse the different levels the groups engage with the omnipresent topic of farmer suicides.

4.2 Suicides and Movement Groups

At the most concrete level, the activists supported the bereaved in getting compensation payments from the government. This is a form of 'fixing qualities' (see section 1.2 and 2.1, chapter V). As mentioned earlier, a young farmer whose parents both committed suicide the same day told that Tiwari came to his house, gave him his condolences and helped him get the compensation by arranging the required documents. Furthermore and more importantly, activists of all groups try to support the farmers in the event of family problems, crop failure or debts to prevent them from committing suicide.

Apart from direct material help, activists and fellow supporters provide "*mental support*" for the farmers who are isolated, lonely and desperate. Both supporters and activists described this as one of the groups' main tasks. One crucial aspect of this mental support was to assure the farmers that all their problems, the lack of resources and the indebtedness, were not their fault or failure, but instead the government's. This takes away the responsibility for their situation and relates the difficulties to structural aspects; in other words, it shifts the responsibility from the individuals to the structures, and especially to a state that acts against the farmers' interests.

This implies that the farmers' failures should no longer be perceived as humiliation and therefore a reason to commit suicide, but rather as a reason to fight and join the group. Additionally, the activists try to convince farmers that committing suicide does not change anything, either in the short or the long run. Farmers instead need to organize to change government policies. A supporter of AIKS reasoned that *"kisans should stay alive and protest. Because just by dying, the family problems are not going to be solved. We do this kind of discussions with them."* A supporter of KAA said that "*we tell the kisans 'don't commit suicide, but enter the battlefield'. (…) The politics of these rich parties is that they*

don't allow the kisans to enter the battlefield. But if the kisans comes on the street, then the rich parties will be in trouble." Kakade of KAA claimed that the farmers often feel they have no other choice than to commit suicide, but that this is not be true, because they can always *"go to the street and fight there and die. Then at least something would change".* Or, as the local activist of SSS said, "*don't drink poison, come for agitation*."

In this sense, the movement actors sometimes conceptualize the suicides themselves as a form of agitation. Jawandhia told that once the Prime Minister of Congress had visited his village. Jawandhia told him that the suicides were caused by the government's policies, and that those farmers who did not commit suicide were not living a good life, that they simply "*live because they are just not dying. Because to live doesn't require more than a hand full of rice and a pinch of salt.*" He further argued that "*kisans suicides is an agitation, it is the peak of the iceberg*". In this context, the journalist Chandrakanth Wankhade saw the suicides as a "*silent movement*".

In certain cases, the suicides – or their threat – already are far from silent, but rather loud demands. The threat to commit suicide has become a very direct way to pressure government officials or politicians. As an example, one old farmer told how he came to the group. He was very badly affected by moneylenders. In his despair, he had gone to Mumbai and asked the Ministers for help. He said that he had been – and still was – ready to commit suicide if nothing would change. The Minister told him to address SSS in order to get support. Another example is a farmer, supporter of AIKS, who grew sugarcane. He said that he had planned to sell his crop to a big sugarcane factory owned by a big BJP leader. But after one year, the factory had still not bought his sugarcane so that all the sugarcane got wasted. The farmer went to the manager of the sugar factory, told him that he was desperate and threatened him "*if you don't give me the money, I don't have any other option than to commit suicide*". He reported that he was still unsuccessful. So, he went to a local activist of AIKS and told him his problems. The activist helped him and "*he sent one letter to the BJP leader. He said that he should pay that money or otherwise this person will commit suicide. Then you have to pay also for his crops, his sugarcane and his suicide as well. So you should rather give that money now."* After this, the farmer got his money and decided to join AIKS.

Last but not least, the most important level on which the movement actors engage with the farmer suicides is discursive. Very often, the interviewees mentioned the farmer suicides early in an interview to underline the despair and suffering of the farmers. In the first section of this chapter, I have shown that an overwhelming majority of interviewees directly blame the government for the suicides. This argument is used to mobilize supporters or potential supporters, but it is also used extensively in political demands and speeches. By blaming the government for killing farmers, their demands gain urgency and seriousness. Interviewees sometimes argued in the same line as one supporter, saying that "*terrorists [Maoists] are at least not giving troubles to the kisans, but to the politicians, government people. Because they [government] let the kisans die."*

5 Concluding Thoughts: Protesting against Neoliberalism?

5.1 Suicides as Part of Movement Activism in Vidarbha

In India in particular but also far beyond, farmer suicides have become an important part of the discourse in farmer movements, in the media and in academic debates. These discourses together with the state's own practices and statistical categories constantly reify the phenomenon of farmer suicides (leaving aside the question of whether it can be statistically proven or not). The phenomenon of farmer suicides serves as a prominent and emotional issue to underline the devastating effects of world market prices, fading state support or GM crops on farmers. It opens up a space to talk about the implications of industrialized agriculture and particularly neoliberal policies on farmers. In the case of Vidarbha, most interviewees agree with the academic and public discourses that blame the neoliberal policies of the early 1990s – and therefore the government that issued them – as the cause of these deaths.

Because of the explosiveness of this accusation, farmer suicides figure prominently in the political rhetoric particularly of movement activists, but also other politicians, even the Prime Minister. The actors of the movement in Vidarbha have actively used the rhetoric of the suicides to emphasize their suffering and to prove how badly the government treats them. As a consequence, the suicides have become 'public deaths' (Münster 2015a). Despite many farmers referring to political demands in their suicide notes, I argue that only exceptional cases of suicides are explicitly political acts. Still, even if most of them are seemingly apolitical individual acts, they become political because they relate to the far-reaching discourse of farmer suicides.

Consequently the actors of the movement around the 'agrarian crisis' in Vidarbha engage with the farmer suicides on many levels, be it as a threat to the politicians, to mobilize new supporters, or to underline the urgency of their demands towards the governments. If not the suicides themselves, then the rhetoric about them and various levels of engagement with them have made them a part of the activism in Vidarbha.

The question remains whether the movements emerged and developed in parallel with the suicides and then took them up in their framings and actions or whether the movements emerged as a consequence of the suicides. This is difficult to answer without data that would allow a comparison of movement groups in Vidarbha and in other parts of India. As mentioned in section 3.2 in this chapter, Shah (2012) argued that the suicides are caused by a lack of other forms of political imagination, e.g. farmer movements. Also Vasavi (2012, 154) saw an absence of agrarian movements and stated an "*inability and failure of agriculturalists to mobilise around issues pertinent to agrarian issues and to demand and gain policies*". When I talked to the journalist P. Sainath, he claimed that the burning question was: *"what did fundamentally change in the farmers' universe that they went from mass movement to mass suicide?"* All these readings and comments imply that suicides are a consequence of a lack of movements rather than the movements emerging as a consequence of the suicides. This was my impression as well.

The suicides were important to emphasize the severity of the situation, to engage with people as I have described in section 4. When telling me or others about suicides, a hope resonated in these arguments. A hope that external agents such as myself would understand how difficult the situation was for the farmers and that the suicides were even a reason to take action. For the farmers themselves, though, the suicides were not a trigger for becoming engaged in a movement, and if so only as a symptom, as proof of the desperate situation they faced. In sum, it is a reasonable assertion that suicides are an outcome of a long process of weakening of farmer movements that occurred in the context of neoliberal reorganisation of rural society. Interestingly, the same farmers who were able to organise themselves into strong farmer movements as late as the 1980s are now resorting to suicides, understood either as silent protest or desperate escape.

Another aspect that demands special attention is the role of movements in the building of farmer consciousness. This is not directly a subject of the present study, but the increased pressure on middle peasantry within the existing agrarian-social structure is a matter of concern. The older structures have yet to give way to a newer social and economic formation but the persistence of suicides has reinvigorated the debate on rural transformation. The new farmer movements do not manage to form a new farmer consciousness that would do justice to these new realities (see chapter VI).

In the following section, I aim to place the farmer suicides in India in the context of other incidents of suicides that have been recently used rhetorically to point to the injustice of the current system. I am going to talk about three cases of suicides that hardly count as classical protest suicides. They are seemingly apolitical individual acts of despair, but they have become political through the way media, academia or activists have framed these deaths.

5.2 Beyond India: Framing Suicides

China: Global Labour Regime

The suicides of young workers at Foxconn have shocked the global public. Thirteen young workers attempted or committed suicide at two Foxconn production sites in the first months of 2010 (Foxconn is a Chinese supplier for Apple, HP, Dell, IBM, Samsung, Nokia, Hitachi and other electronic giants). Chan and Pun (2010) stated that Chinese migrant workers are exploited by the transnational electronic companies in the global electronics supply chain as well as by the local management through their methods to increase worker efficiency and silence protest. Equally importantly, Chinese officials cooperate with the two former actors, neglect basic labour rights and are therefore also responsible for these exploitative conditions. The authors claim that "*their defiant deaths demand that society reflect upon the costs of a state-promoted development model that sacrifices dignity for corporate profit in the name of economic growth*" and that the suicides can be interpreted "*as protest against a global labour regime that is widely practiced in China*" (ibid, 2) – even if the individuals committed suicide out of despair rather than direct protest.

Guo et al. (2012) have analysed the media coverage of the Foxconn suicides and argue that while in China the suicides where framed as being caused by psychological problems, in Western newspapers they were framed with regards to "*global social justice and world economy*" (ibid, 484). These two articles show how these suicides are framed very similarly to the farmer suicides: as the last desperate protest of people adversely included in the global economy.

Europe: Austerity Measures

The second example comes from Europe where there have been increased rates of suicides over the period of 2007-2009. Several studies and newspaper articles have directly associated them to governments' economic policies. This period coincided with the economic downturn of certain countries and the European Union's austerity measures (Stuckler et al. 2009). Karanikos et al. (2013, 1323) argued that it is particularly Greece, Spain and Portugal, the countries that adopted strict fiscal austerity, that had an increased rate of suicides. Iceland, which rejected austerity policies through a popular vote, did not see such an increase. This study as well as McKee et al. (2012, 346) directly blamed the austerity measures not only for being an economic failure but also for being a health failure and responsible for the increasing number of suicides.

Povoledo and Carvajal (2012) in an article in the New York Times argued that in these fragile countries, it is mostly small-business owners, entrepreneurs and retirees who increasingly decide to take their own life. Stuckler, the author of the above mentioned study, argued that the "*financial crisis puts the lives of ordinary people at risk. (…) Austerity can turn a crisis into an epidemic*" (cited in Povoledo and Carvajal 2012). While most of these suicides happen in private, some suicides decide to turn "*their personal despair into dramatic public expression of anger at the leaders*" whom they perceive to have failed them in the face of the crisis. Povoledo and Carvajal (2012) find that some European newspapers have started calling these suicides "*suicide by economic crisis*". These discourses again construct a connection between an adverse inclusion into an economic system and the act of suicide. They use the suicides to underline the adverse effects that these austerity measures – also rooted in a neoliberal ideology – have on people.

I want to state clearly that I am not discussing protest suicides as such, only people who decide to take their own life, often with quite apolitical personal intentions. It is the media, the academic discourses or the political rhetoric that use these suicides to show the downsides of neoliberal development paradigms. Therefore, the next example might sound a little far fetched. It is in fact different from the ones above, but I believe that it still fits this debate to a certain extent.

Tunisia: The Spark of the Arab Revolutions

When Mohammed Bouazizi immolated himself in December 2010, his attempted (and eventually successful) suicide was the spark for the Arab Revolutions. Bouazizi earned a living for his family as a street vendor. He illegally ran a vegetable stall for many years. Suddenly, the police confiscated his cart and his goods worth 225 USD and denied him

his regular location on the street market. Bouazizi tried to bribe the officer, but was insulted. He therefore went to complain to the local municipality office, without any success. He left the office, returning an hour later to immolate himself in front of this very government building (Zevnik 2014).

Most people agree that Bouazizi was a small merchant operating outside the law and facing insurmountable obstacles from the government. His despair was caused by the economic harassment of state officials (Abulof 2012; Zevnik 2014). His suicide *"thus publicly tore off the last shreds of the mask*" that the autocratic regime had been wearing (Abulof 2012). Bouazizi's despair was neither mainly nor directly caused by neoliberal policies. It is important, however, to acknowledge that Tunisia under president Ben Ali was a one of the "*celebrated success stories of the 'Washington Consensus', or neoliberal reform*" (Pfeifer 2016, 21). As a consequence of neoliberal policies, public investment and services shrank while the benefits of these policies concentrated in the hands of a few ruling families. Inequality and poverty therefore increased (Pfeifer 2016, 42). In some sense, Bouazizi's suicide is different from the above cases. But in another sense, "*the Tunisian uprising is also an answer to the hideous neo-liberal model of economic development*" (Nazemroaya 2011) and so therefore, at least in the discourses, is also Bouazizi's death.

While there is no doubt that Bouazizi's death became a public death, only a few media and protest groups framed the suicide itself as a political protest (see e.g. BBC 2011). Many others rather argued that is was an individual act of despair (Abulof 2012; Zevnik 2014). De Soto (2011) in his article in Foreign Policy tried figuring out who the "*real Bouazizi*" was. He sees him as an apolitical man and his suicide not as a protest suicide. When De Soto asked Bouazizi's brother what would have been his brother's wish, he said: "*That the poor also have the right to buy and sell*" (all cited in De Soto 2011). Despite these 'apolitical', economic reasons and intentions, Bouazizi did not choose to commit suicide where nobody could see him, though. He instead chose a place where a wide audience would witness this act of desperation (Abulof 2012).

Spehr and Dixon (2013) described Bouazizi's suicide as caused by "*blocked aspirations of a personal sort*". But they would be "*associated with practices that violated the aspirations of most people in his society who wished to achieve their individual, as well as collective, goals"* (ibid, 381). Zevnik (2014) argued that "*what made Bouazizi's act so powerful was not the radical act itself – the sacrifice of life – but rather the desperation that led him to it*". He argues that this desperation was shared by many Tunisians. De Soto (2011) argued that the "*desire to prosper*" and the despair in face of these obstacles is what resonated so strongly across the differentiated Arab world. Rua Wall (2012) concludes that the suicide was *"a gesture that marked and traced the everyday injustice shared by all in the situation, but about which all had to remain silent*" (cited in Zevnik 2014).

As a consequence and despite the impression that Bouazizi's suicide was not a protest suicide, he has become "*to some (…) a generic symbol of the resistance to injustice; to others an archetype of the fight against autocracy*" (De Soto 2011). Again, it was also

against an autocratic state that implemented neoliberal policies. As a consequence, the 'Occupy Wall Street'-activists used his suicide in their "*struggle against the unholy alliance between Washington and corporate America*" (ibid). To conclude, how these authors frame Bouazizi's death is in a similar line with the suicides described above: a man who was deprived of his livelihood and who committed suicide out of despair. Even if he did not intend the act of suicide as a protest suicide, activists later used his suicide to point to the harm caused by economic policies or economic practices of the state.

5.3 Making Grief Tangible

These three examples – very similar to the farmer suicides – are framed as a desperate protest not by those who do not have anything, but by those who fear they will lose everything they have. Neoliberal development was a promise to have a stake in growth and wealth, but these hopes have been bitterly disappointed. An Irish man who had attempted to commit suicide earlier asked "*how many other people lie awake at night with the same fears? How many people are on the verge of losing everything?"* (cited in Povoledo and Carvajal 2012). In the same line, De Soto (2011) said that for most people in Europe or the USA, it might seem inconceivable to commit suicide because of a loss worth 225 USD and a location on a street market as Bouazizi had done. But for many people across the Arab world – and I would argue across most parts of the world – it was immediately understood. It was not corruption or even public humiliation that killed him, but it was that "*he had been deprived of the only thing that stood between him and starvation"* (De Soto 2011).

These suicides are examples of a desperate protest against unbearable economic conditions. Chan and Pun (2010) cited from a worker blog (after the twelfth suicide) to make this despair and this sense of marginalization tangible:

> *"To die is the only way to testify that we ever lived. Perhaps for the Foxconn employees and employees like us (…) the use of death is simply to testify that we were ever alive at all, and that while we lived, we had only despair."*

Chan and Pun (2010) further argued that suicide is "*the most desperate form of protest. It should not be used as a means to resist social injustice*" (ibid, 32). Even if the individuals committing suicides themselves did not mean to commit a political suicide, their suicides – mostly because they occurred in large numbers – have been used by social activists to underline the grief that economic policies can cause across national boundaries. Sometimes, as in the case of farmer suicides, people that attempted to commit suicide raise their voice and call for action. The Irish man cited above, continued that "*everyone in Ireland must become active in our rescue*" (cited in Povoledo and Carvajal 2012).

In conclusion, I argue that farmer suicides can be seen in this context of suicides that are not protest suicides as such but rather apolitical, individual acts that become political because of the way media, researchers and movement activists engage with them. These discourses construct a direct causal relationship between neoliberal economic policies and the suicides. Here the South Korean farmer Lee Kyung Hae, who killed himself

during protests against the WTO in Cancùn, is another example. The American Punkband Anti-Flag dedicated him the song "*W.T.O. kills farmers* " and hoped to see "*the spark of revolution in a farmer's suicide*" (Anti-Flag 2006). The farmer suicides serve as impressive, visible examples of the injustice caused by certain economic – mostly neoliberal – policies. The argument that suicides are caused by these policies, that the policies would literally kill these people, becomes important. Why?

Neoliberalism has become so dominant that alternatives are difficult to imagine. People suffering from the current economic system are rather seen as a residual category, as short-term collateral damage, if they are seen at all. First, this means that the radical act of ending one's life can be used to prove the desperate suffering of these people and to attract attention to their issues. Second, the neoliberal argument claims that in the long term, all the people now suffering would profit from the trickle-down effect of the neoliberal development path eventually. Furthermore, if these people would develop enough entrepreneurial capabilities to take part in the markets, their situation would improve. It seems that for all questions or accusations of people opposing these economic policies, neoliberalism has an answer – that most often lies in the future. However, if a person decides to take his or her own life and therefore dispossesses him- or herself of this future, this stands in crass contrast to those neoliberal promises.

Therefore, these suicides can be understood as pointing towards the dark sides of the dominant development narrative, especially when they bear the potential to make voices louder – or even heard – especially those voices that have been silenced or deliberately overheard. When movement activists engage with these suicides, they can draw attention to problems and sufferings of people who are adversely affected by the process of globalization and liberalization of markets and who therefore experience their structural violence. Consequently, these suicides have become important for social movement struggles and discourses not only in India, but in other countries as well. It has become a strategy of social movements, locally and globally, to point to people committing suicide to make their grief tangible and their demands visible. It is an attempt to re-politicize these seemingly apolitical neoliberal policies of liberalization, increased efficiency or austerity.

VIII. Conclusions

The objective of this research was *to show how people in Vidarbha affected by the 'agrarian crisis' mobilise to struggle for their concerns/interests and what the latter are.* In sum, the study found what can be called a heterogeneous movement, consisting of several micro-movements or movement groups that claim to speak for the farmers of Vidarbha. They mobilise mostly landed, rather small farmers that are engaged in dry-land cotton production. While these are not the most downtrodden of the rural society, they do suffer from the neoliberal policies introduced in the 1990s.

This heterogeneous movement is rather weak, but it is very diverse and the movement actors develop creative strategies to confront the perceived 'mysterious forces of the market' and the 'unreachable government'. I argue that this gives the movement a potential to make visible and politicise the effects of the neoliberal policies. An important strategy to do so is to make farmers aware of the structural reasons for their desperate situation and to engage in the discourse of farmer suicides. This helps to underline the hardship of the farmers towards decision makers and the public.

I showed that leaders and particularly activists take an important role in mobilising farmers. In order to be successful, they need to prove their trustworthiness on different levels. This means a balancing act between being a 'political leader', perceived as corrupt but able to do things, and being a 'movement leader', honest but powerless. This contradiction is symptomatic and is also mirrored in the groups' failure to form alliances representing different interests of those suffering from the neoliberal policies.

The groups, based on a particular understanding of the 'agrarian crisis', raise one main demand: a remunerative price from the government for the farmers' agricultural produce. Innate in this price demand though, are several tensions that relate back to how they frame the 'agrarian crisis', for whose interests they speak and what their visions about the future of agriculture are. Indeed, the price demand first tends to hide the structural inequalities among farmers and hinders the groups from fully politicising neoliberalism. The rhetorical importance of this price demand also risks to hide the many different, creative ideas and ways of resisting that these movement groups exhibit.

In the following, I will elaborate on these findings based on my fieldwork and academic engagement. I will end this conclusion with reflections on very recent political developments in Vidarbha and their consequences for the farmers' mobilisations.

1 The 'Agrarian Crisis': A Web of Inequalities and Risks

To understand the mobilisations, it is first and foremost important to understand the very difficult situation that large sections of the peasantry in Vidarbha are facing, a situation generally labelled as 'agrarian crisis'. Therefore, one research sub-question was: *How do the movement actors understand the present situation of agriculture in Vidarbha, and how do these perceptions correlate with available statistical data* (see chapter III)?

I found that the 'agrarian crisis' and its immediate reasons are depicted very similarly in testimonies of interviewees, academic studies and data from the government. Because of – among other reasons – low prices and insufficient irrigation, the material conditions of many cotton farmers in Vidarbha are harsh and they live below the poverty line. This is despite the fact that some of them have relatively big land holdings. But beyond this description, the 'agrarian crisis' also offers an arena, where politicians, movement leaders and activists as well as farmers voice different understandings of the situation in the countryside. This, in turn, affects the demands they raise.

Based on these different perceptions and understandings, the academic literature and statistical data that I analysed in this thesis, I conceptualize the 'agrarian crisis' as a web of various layers of inequalities and increasingly dreadful risks. Such a conceptualisation helps basing a structural analysis on grassroots testimonies, while still triangulating them with statistical data and academic analysis. As I will detail below, understanding the crisis in this way implies to scrutinize the different layers of inequality that lay – open or hidden – in the different data. In contrast, the popular conception of the 'agrarian crisis' tends to see the very differentiated 'peasantry' as one class, avoiding the multitude of social and economic factors that mediate the effects of the crisis (section 3, chapter II). An understanding of the agrarian crisis as a web of risks and layers of inequality then, makes the unequal consequences of the 'agrarian crisis' visible.

Layers of Inequality

The first significant inequality relevant for farmers and activists was *regional inequality*. Within the state of Maharashtra, the eastern regions of Vidarbha and Marathwada are worse off in terms of developmental and agricultural indicators than Western Maharashtra. This inequality can be found in the perception of people as well as in statistical data and studies (see section 1, chapter III). One of its most important manifestations is that Vidarbha has a very small area under irrigation, most of which relies strongly on private investments in groundwater pumps belonging to relatively better off farmers. This regional inequality is caused by a particular constellation of caste-based politics that has allowed the dominant Maratha-Kunbi caste complex to channel resources to Western Maharashtra, away from Vidarbha's cotton fields. Additionally, the Green Revolution technology largely neglected dry land regions and the crops that can suitably be grown there. Even in terms of price support, cotton, being the major crop in the area, is less supported than sugar cane, being the main crop of Western Maharashtra (section 2, chapter II).

The second inequality refers to an allegedly general *neglect of agriculture* compared to urban areas, conceptualised as the 'urban bias' (see section 3, chapter II). Indeed, the idea of the urban bias still reverberates in many papers and articles about the 'agrarian crisis' in India, even if it remains highly questionable whether there is any statistical proof for this. The New Farmers Movements (see section IV, chapter IV) were clear proponents of the urban bias ideas. Although they lost their strength in the 1990s, the idea has survived, not only among the remaining factions of these New Farmers'

Movements (some of them now being part of the heterogeneous movement in Vidarbha), but in all groups.

The third layer of inequality lies in the *inequalities within the rural society* of Vidharba, i.e. those between labourers and landed farmers, between genders and castes. I collected the testimonies of farmers (see section 3.1, part I), focusing on the inequalities among themselves, that is between landed farmers owning different landholdings. This layer of inequality resonated in the farmers' testimonies, but more so in an implicit manner: When talking directly about the 'agrarian crisis', many farmers supported the view of the whole of Vidarbha's peasantry in crisis. But when talking about their problems in more detail, farmers for example explained that agricultural profitability would highly depend on the size of their landholding, irrigation facilities and available capital. Additionally, in the perception of many farmers, the inequality and conflict between farmers and moneylenders and traders (often the same person) is important (see section 3.2, chapter III).

I found that these immediate exploitations of farmers and the inequality between the different classes of farmers are much more reflected in the testimonies of the farmers than in those of movement leaders. Also in most of the studies I found on the 'agrarian crisis', the immediate exploitations of farmers within villages remain a neglected subject (see chapter II and III). However, when scrutinizing the available statistical data, some authors found that Indian rural society is increasingly differentiated. Old structures of inequality and oppression meet neoliberal New Economic Policies to enable the rich farmers to accumulate wealth, while the marginal and small farmers face the risk of complete pauperization (see section 3, chapter II).

Increasingly Dreadful Risks

The first risk that farmers face is price, that is, the price farmers get for their agricultural output. The Green Revolution was accompanied by heavy state support for agriculture. This included the provision of rural credit or inputs as well as the Minimum Support Price (see section 2.1, chapter III). In the 1990s, this kind of state support decreased tremendously as a result of the New Economic Policies (section 1.3, chapter II). The still existing price support, i.e. the Minimum Support Price, is too low for many farmers to earn a profit, in the perception of farmers as well as according to statistical data. Additionally, many – particularly the poor – sections of the peasantry are indebted at moneylenders cum traders. This makes it difficult to realize even market or minimum support prices. Apart from that, many farmers expressed a deep unease because they do not know how and by whom market prices are determined and because the next season's prices would then be pure speculation.

The second risk is that the input prices have increased and become increasingly volatile. The farmers often said that the costs of production increased faster than the prices for outputs – a fact that is backed-up by academic studies. In a more and more cash-intensive Green Revolution agriculture, the prices of inputs have a huge impact on farmers. During the Green Revolution, high state support allowed farmers to gauge the

risk of high input costs, volatile prices and possible crop failure to a certain extent. But with the New Economic Policies, the state has withdrawn from all these areas of support such as credit, extension service or regulation of the input market. Also during Green Revolution, the policies have concentrated on certain states, certain crops and classes of farmers. But the neoliberal policies worsened the situation by leaving extension, research and investment to be dependent on private capital. The small and medium farmers in less endowed regions like Vidarbha could then only hope for the support of a withdrawing state.

The third risk is the ecological scope of the 'agrarian crisis'. Many farmers reported that the timings and amount of rains have changed. This is a tremendous risk particularly for those without irrigation. Those farmers who irrigate, said that they would need to drill the wells deeper and deeper. This depletion of groundwater levels is also caused by agricultural policies: In dry land areas like Vidarbha, the lack of state regulation and support for irrigation leads to a heavy dependence on privately financed groundwater irrigation, leading to an overuse of the groundwater (see section 2, chapter II; section 2, chapter III). Additionally, there is an increasing pressure on land that manifests itself in soil salinization and erosion, as well as surface water pollution. The general environmental and health risks of Green Revolution agriculture are severely worsened when the state fails to regulate certain areas of agriculture, i.e. if the prices of different fertilizers are allowed to float freely, if the sale and use of pesticides are not regulated, or if extension services are not provided.

Taking into consideration these risks, this research provides an empirical contribution to Gupta's (2016) argument that agriculture is increasingly a 'speculative activity'. Agriculture relies on an increasingly unpredictable climate and equally unpredictable markets. Farmers have to take up loans to start agriculture, invest in extension and more inputs and then hope for the rains and prices to make a profit. Otherwise they fail completely. The ability of farmers to cope with these risks, whether they are able to make profits or whether they fail, strongly depends on the different layers of inequality.

2 Nature of Mobilisations in Vidarbha

The mobilizations around this 'agrarian crisis' are very energetic. The involved groups and activists engage in making sense of the current situation in agriculture and in analysing this web of inequalities and risks. They all claimed to speak for the farmers and raised very similar demands, such as remunerative prices and a better infrastructure to enable profitable farming. This leads to the research sub-question about *the nature of these mobilisations that form around the 'agrarian crisis' and the phenomenon of farmer suicides in Western Vidarbha*.

A Heterogeneous Movement around Crisis

I observed five very heterogeneous groups, four of which – despite their differences – perceived themselves and each other as parts of a broader movement in Vidarbha around the 'agrarian crisis' (see chapter III). One such group is S*vabhimani Shetkari*

Sanghatana (SSS), within Vidarbha mostly active in Buldhana district. They developed as a faction of the earlier New Farmers' Movement *Shetkari Sanghatana.* Now, they work all over Maharashtra with a strong presence in Western Maharashtra. The group focuses heavily on the issues of the price of agricultural produce and it organizes large political agitations. A second group is *Kisan Adikar Abiyan* (KAA), founded in the 1990s and active in the Wardha district. Its activists believe in targeted political actions and organize 'constructive' activities in order to provide support to the farmers. A third group is *Vidarbha Jan Andolan Samiti* (VJAS), in which the leader plays a particularly important role. It is active in the Yavatmal district. Along its direct support to people, farmer suicides are an important issue that they try to publicise. Then, *All India Kisan Sabha* (AIKS) is the farmer wing of the Communist Party of India (Marxist), within Vidarbha mostly active in the Wardha district. They believe in direct action and, more than other groups, they criticise the New Economic Policies and problematize inequality within villages. Finally, *Bharatiya Kisan Sangha* (BKS) is also one of those groups, within Vidarbha mostly active in the Nagpur district. They are an India-wide organization and belong to the *sangh parivar,* the organisations that promote the Hindutva. They are not very active or well networked within this heterogeneous movement in Vidarbha. The other movement activists often considered the activists of BKS too communalist to work with.

All these groups conduct a range of activities. This includes political agitations as well as backing their supporters in their interactions with the state or market actors (see section 3, chapter IV; and section 2, chapter V). With the exception of AIKS, the groups do not have clear memberships, organizational structures or defined roles within the groups. Rather, most of these groups have a leader, some activists and many supporters who are more or less closely attached and involved. All the groups are small in Vidarbha, even if SSS and AIKS have a considerable presence elsewhere. Their local geographical reach is very limited as they are active and known primarily in those villages where an activist is doing the mobilization work, whereas they might be unknown in a neighbouring village. As a result, the groups hardly stand in direct competition with each other. Rather, the different groups try to network and cooperate horizontally to increase their strength. But this cooperation is irregular, limited to individual discussions or agitations. The leaders often deemed closer cooperation as impossible. They emphasized the differences in their political ideologies and mistrusted the others' honest intentions. The reason that cooperation still happens despite these differences is often only because they believe that there are no other cooperation partners – "*no other sane people around*", in an activist's own words.

There are several other actors that I consider part of the broader movement, based on the people's perceptions: the farmer wings of the main party coalitions in the state of Maharashtra, i.e. the Congress-NCP and the BJP-Sena. While the former was not so active at the time of the study, some BJP leaders were perceived as being part of the movement. But much more important were old activists from *Shetkari Sanghatana* as well as certain journalists who worked in solidarity with the groups.

In defining what I call the heterogeneous movement, I strongly refer to the emic understandings of the actors involved. Within this emic understanding, however, the movements' perceived borders are far from clearly defined. First, it is important to the actors in the different groups that NGOs do not belong to the movement. They argued that the NGOs active in the area – in contrary to the movement groups – would not have explicitly political, rights-based demands. Rather, their activities were confined to charitable support for the people. Second, it was crucial for the groups to distinguish themselves from political parties that take part in electoral politics. This boundary, though, is even more difficult to maintain than the distinction from NGOs. The groups VJAS and KAA did have connections to political parties, but were not directly active in electoral politics. SSS and AIKS, on contrary, did directly take part in electoral politics. I discuss below how activists were well aware of these ambivalent relationships when trying to distinguish between the spheres of 'movements' and 'politics'.

Movement Surviving

The structures I found in Vidarbha of many small groups building a heterogeneous 'movement' closely relates to the concept of 'micro-movements' (Sheth 2004). The groups are neither NGOs nor political parties and this concept helps in understanding them with respect to their role in Vidarbha. The groups do profess a politics and vision of their own by associating and dissociating themselves from certain ideological strands. In their everyday activities they might speak of immediate demands and cooperate with other actors with similar demands. But the groups' demands and ideas are not merely local. By talking about the 'agrarian crisis' and the situation of farmers in a neoliberal environment, they also relate to the broad debates among global (farmer) movements (see chapter I and VI).

I conceptualize these mobilizations or these different micro-movements as heterogeneous movement, though still as one 'social movement' (following Bebbington 2009, see chapter IV). This conceptualization helps understanding these groups in the context of the 'agrarian crisis', of the global rural neoliberal restructuring as well as reflects the emic understanding of activists and farmers involved. Combining this with a qualitative methodology reveals the strategies of and cooperation that the activists apply. Particularly, it revealed the activists' attempts to increase the political awareness of farmers in a phase of low levels of movement activities.

Certainly, the earlier peasant movements of the 1960s and 1980s were more powerful in voicing their issues on a political level. This said, it is difficult to retrospectively compare the present structure of the heterogeneous movement to the moments of purportedly high level of movement activities in the 1960s or 1980s. One could also argue that on a very local level, the earlier movements were (only) effective in those villages where they had strong activists – which is very similar to today's movement reality. But today and at the state and national level, the old peasant movements and the New Farmers' Movements have surely lost their strength (see section 2, chapter IV). Interestingly, *Shetkari Sanghatana* is still much better known among farmers than any of the other, recent groups.

A second point around which the earlier peasant movements might be compared to today's movements is the question of representation. Having one large movement (earlier) can mean to create one (strong) voice of 'the farmers'. Considering the ambivalence of this discourse and of the price demand (see section 3.2, part VI), this bears, however, a risk: It can result in giving priority to the issues of those farmers with larger landholdings and of dominant castes while neglecting those of small and marginal farmers and lower castes. In contrast, today's multitude of groups (i.e. the structure of a heterogeneous movement) can possibly open up an opportunity to give voice to a larger range of issues that different types of farmers face and to give opportunities to more marginalized groups' demands. This, though, is a theoretical option, and it is crucial to look closely at the actual reality, i.e. to see whose voices the contemporary micro-movements really represent. This is addressed in the next section.

A Movement for Whom

The groups and movement actors I met claimed to speak for the *kisans*, the farmers of Vidarbha. Indeed, the main constituency of each of the active groups is small and medium farmers (see chapter III; section 3, chapter I). When looking closer at the groups' constituencies though, it becomes evident that it is mostly male, landed farmers often of dominant castes. But even if they are surely not the most oppressed of the rural society, they are still those affected by the 'agrarian crisis', those whose hopes and aspirations have been raised by the neoliberal New Economic Policies, those who are now bitterly disappointed by these policies.

This makes it no less important to look at the sections of rural people and the injustices that the movement groups do not include. First, the people who own no land at all and work as agricultural labourers face extreme oppression and poverty. It is clear that the contemporary heterogeneous movement around the 'agrarian crisis' has little to offer the agricultural labourers. Most movement actors (with notable exceptions) believed that the struggle for higher prices would automatically increase the wages of the labourers. Some even saw the labourers as part of the farmers' problem. However, many of the supporters were working not only on their own land, but also as labourers on other people's land. This indicates that the distinction between farmers and agricultural labourers is highly complex and overlapping. Interestingly, thus, when they understood themselves as actors of a movement groups, they refered only to their identity as landed farmers.

Second, caste oppression was hardly ever a topic among the groups and inequality was never framed in terms of caste. The castes represented in the groups are mostly the ones that dominate the rural landscape in Vidarbha. But there are also many ST and SC among the constituency of some groups. Nevertheless, I did not find a reflection of their caste basis or other related caste issues in any of the groups. This is not surprising. Historically, farmer discourse and politics have rarely been about caste oppression but rather tried to envision a homogenous class of peasantry.

Last but not least, this heterogeneous movement around agrarian crisis and suicides is dominated by men. There are no female leaders or activists and very few female supporters were interested in talking to me about 'politics'. The existing women's self-help groups do not see themselves as part of any kind of movement and are distinctly different in their activities. It is therefore not surprising that women's issues are remarkably absent in the discourses of the groups. The only exception is the demand for an abolition of the exorbitantly high dowry that concerns not only the women, but also affects the whole families.

Grievances Fuelling Protest?

To conclude then, there exists a movement, but considering the scope and severity of the agrarian crisis, it is smaller than it could expected to be. To understand this issue, I rely on approaches that are brought forward by Buechler (2011, 2016) and Bebbington (2009). They understand certain kinds of grievances and senses of injustice to be likely to spark mobilisations and unrest (see section 1.2, chapter I). I argue that the situation of an 'agrarian crisis' in Vidarbha is such, that one would expect larger mobilisations, a big emerging social movement. There are essentially five points to consider.

To start with, many farmers do experience daily disruptions in their lives. These disruptions arrive in the form of liberalisation of markets, the consequent upsetting of prices or the state's withdrawal from the banking sector that leaves farmers vulnerable to moneylender humiliations and pressures. Last but not least the climatic changes and unreliable rains pose a disruption that is only likely to grow. Second, there is a feeling of relative deprivation among farmers. They compare their situation to other parts of the state, to urban areas in general or to big landholders. Third, but less pronounced, is the perception that the grievances increase in time. The perception that things were better earlier referred to times when cotton was 'white gold' and the state provided credits. Fourth, the processes for distributing wealth are perceived as being extremely unjust. The processes mentioned are the state of Maharashtra's policies as well as the prices. As a fifth point, I found that many activists in Vidarbha attempted to heighten a perception of injustice by framing the 'agrarian crisis' in a certain way. They aimed to make the farmers aware that they are not responsible for their difficult situation but that there are structural reasons for their personal failures.

Taking these specific (perception of) grievances and disruptions into consideration, one could expect a large movement to emerge. Yet, the movement in Vidarbha is far from being big. This shows that there are other factors that determine the emergence of mobilisations. For the case of Vidarbha I argue that one of these factors is the focus of movement actors on only one issue, i.e. price. With this, many layers of inequalities and injustices relevant to diverse sections of the rural population are not addressed. Therefore, the movement groups fail to provide a platform to jointly fight these diverse exploitations.

3 Strategies of Mobilisation: Trustworthiness

A crucial factor for the potential success of the groups' mobilisations is the perceived trustworthiness of leaders and activists. This factor became empirically very evident when studying one research sub-question: *the different motivations for people's participation and the mobilization strategies the different movement actors use, specifically if and why participation in electoral politics is a part of these strategies*.

Lack of resources, particularly time, was often given as the main reasons for not participating. But I found that the most important reason for people to dedicate their scarce resources to a group was the perceived trustworthiness of the leaders and activists. A perception of doubt in their trustworthiness was the most important reason for not participating. As a result, proving trustworthiness became the crucial mobilizing strategy. First and foremost, it was the leaders and the activists working in the villages, who built this trustworthiness day-to-day. Their activities and strategies provide an empirical example of what Gorringe (2010) called the painstaking work of mobilizing people.

Able Fixers with Honest Intentions – Between Politics and Movements

I argue that the endeavour to establish and maintain this trustworthiness is marked by a contradiction. This contradiction can also be found in the work of Alm (2010) and Nielsen (2012), to which this study provides more empirical evidence and detail. The contradiction emerges on two levels that I detail below. Activists and leaders, though, are aware of these contradictions. They have different discursive and practical strategies to deal with them and to become successful and trustworthy in the eyes of their (possible) supporters (see chapter V).

The first level on which this contradiction appears is the level of the individual leaders and particularly activists in the villages. On the one hand, activists and leaders need to be good 'fixers' (Jeffrey 2009). The fixing qualities on this level refer to the ability of activists and leaders to achieve things and support farmers in their every-day life. Empirically, this meant to support farmers in their interactions with the government in order to get benefits from or protection against the state. It also meant to strengthen the position of farmers in interactions in the marketplace, especially with traders. Last but not least, it was about immediate – often financial – help. To be able to perform all these activities, it is necessary for the activists to have good relations with powerful and influential people. And these people were often politicians. Now, these powerful politicians are perceived highly corrupt. This can create problems. Maintaining the image of honesty and morally flawless intentions is equally important to proving trustworthiness. This means that when the cooperation and ties of movement activists with those (corrupt) politicians become too close, this puts their reputation of honesty at stake. The same happened when an activist or a leader became too powerful himself. To counter this reputational damage, the leaders and activists keep emphasizing that they are involved in the movement for selfless, honest reasons.

The second level refers to people's relation to electoral politics and therefore the groups' and leaders' participation in the latter. Many people – leaders, activists and supporters – were disillusioned about electoral politics. Often, electoral politics is perceived as the dirty playground of the powerful. Therefore, the image of honesty corresponds closely with whether the farmers saw the leaders as a 'movement leader' or as a 'political leader'. At the same time, though, people hold on to their belief in democracy as the place to change things. As a consequence, the 'political leaders' are those perceived to be able to bring change – and not the (presumably) honest 'movement leaders'.

This balancing act is reflected in the very different relations (but surprisingly similar justifications) of the groups towards participation or non-participation in electoral politics. It is SSS where this contradiction becomes most clear: the group has a movement part (*sangathana*) and a party part (*paksha*). Even though the involved people and the demands are the same, activists and leaders understood this distinction as crucial, presenting the *sanghatana* as responsible for the agitations and the *paksha* for the elections.

In general, the activists and leaders of all groups put a considerable rhetorical effort in distancing themselves from 'politics'. This despite of the political nature of their demands and regardless of their actual involvement in electoral politics. I argue that upholding this distinction is a strategy to achieve or maintain an image of an honest 'movement (leader)'. The leaders, activists and supporters were aware of the contradictions that these dual expectations invoke. I could show that in constant interaction with supporters, leaders and activists tried to redefine their place between being a 'political leader' and being a 'movement leader'. When reflecting on what 'politics' actually means in a democracy, they even try to challenge the power of this distinction and the pejorative notion of 'being political'. Instead, the distinction between established parties in power and the many groups and parties that are not becomes much more important. In Vidarbha, the movement groups in this thesis very clearly belong to the latter. Therefore, they could not outrival the fixing qualities of established parties. Consequently, the groups' reputation of honesty became their main mobilizing argument.

This is not to say that the fixing qualities would be less important to understand the movement. I would even argue that they bring the groups' most important impact on the farmers' lives. These small supports and achieved successes in everyday situations can mean a lot to marginal, small, medium farmers suffering from the 'agrarian crisis'. They remain important, also when there was no one leader capable of gathering the different groups and farmers behind him and achieve bigger successes.

Powerless but Honest – Opening up Spaces

I argue that these groups can open a space for farmers to discuss and agitate for their demands. They have the potential to engage people who are disillusioned by representational, electoral politics. They can reach those farmers, who elect a party for

various reasons such as patronage, but who do not see their demands represented there. This study then provides an empirical case for an argument brought forward by Sahoo (2010). He argued that micro-movement groups have the potential to mobilize people outside the arena of electoral politics. With this, they create other opportunities to people to fight for their demands.

However, the above contradictions clearly show the limitations of this increased involvement. The dual, contradicting expectations of supporters of these movement groups tells us several things about the consciousness of these movement groups. In the distinction often made between civil society and political society (referring to Chatterjee 2004), it can be argued that ordinary supporters act as members of political society locally but affirm their faith in the process of bourgeois civil society for tackling mysterious market forces. This can be interpreted as posing a limit to these movement groups' capacity to form mass alliances as a counter hegemonic force against the politics of neoliberalism.

4 Farmer Suicides as Part of the Movement

Movement actors engage with 'farmer suicides' in many ways. These ways show how important it is for the movement actors to make farmers aware about the structural reasons for the 'agrarian crisis'. Vidarbha is infamous for being a farmer suicide 'hotspot'. The suicides are as omnipresent in the movement actors' discourses as they are important in the public discourse of farmer movements beyond Vidarbha and even India, the media, and academic debates. This refers to the research sub-question about *how movement actors frame these 'farmer suicides' and how they engage with them* (see chapter VII).

Farmer suicides means a statistically higher likelihood for farmers to commit suicide than for other professional groups. It is contested if this higher likelihood does indeed exist. The farmers who do commit suicide are not those who suffer most from the layers of inequality in the 'agrarian crisis', not the poorest or most socially oppressed. Rather, it is those who face high and unpredictable risks. It is those that are confronted with the promises that come with the neoliberal policies, the promise that anyone can make it if they just try. 'Hotspots' for 'farmer suicides' are therefore mostly semi-arid zones with capital-intensive, groundwater-based commercial agriculture. Vidarbha is a case in point. Here too, though, 'old' structural factors that predate the New Economic Policies come into play and combine with the effects of these policies.

Public deaths

I show in this thesis (see section 2, chapter VII) that there is one major reason for the farmer suicides having become part of political farmer protest: the specific way political activists and journalists, as well as in academics explain these suicides. I refer here to those activists and authors who work on the assumption that the phenomenon of 'farmer suicides' statistically exists. They overwhelmingly blame the New Economic Policies of the 1990s. Looking closely, there are two major lines of argument to explain

how these policies have caused farmers to commit suicide. One line emphasizes the directly economic consequences, while the other line analyses more the sociological consequences of the neoliberal policies. Even if these two lines at times criticize each other, they still both accuse neoliberalism as the major cause.

Blaming the neoliberal policies of the early 1990s means – implicitly or explicitly – to blame the government that issued them. It means to put a direct responsibility on the government for indebtedness, desperation and finally the deaths of these farmers. Because of the explosiveness of the accusation, the 'farmer suicides' figure prominently in political rhetoric. This is particularly true for movement activists, but also for other politicians.

Based on this analysis, this research strongly argues that the farmer suicides have become 'public deaths', using a term coined by Münster (2015a). The suicides themselves are not protest suicides because those who commit suicide act mostly out of personal despair. But the discourses of media and academia, of local and global farmer movements make them 'public' and inherently political. Additionally, it is the state's own categories and practices that constantly reify and politicise the phenomenon of 'farmer suicides'. It can be criticized that making such arguments neglect the agency of farmers. But by looking at how the farmer movement actors reclaim this discourse in their activism, their agency becomes clear again.

Suicides in Movements against Neoliberalism

The actors of the movement in Vidarbha engage with the farmer suicides on many levels. By doing this they make the suicides part of the movement around the 'agrarian crisis'. The heterogeneous movement's practices to engage with suicides are both a reason for and a consequence of the suicides having become 'public deaths'. On one level movement activists support the bereaved. For example, they help them to obtain compensation payments from the government. Another level is 'moral support', as movement actors call it. It is when activists assure farmers that the government is in fact responsible for their miserable conditions, and not they themselves. With this, activists aim to counter the neoliberal discourse. This discourse says that farmers only have to be sufficiently entrepreneurial in order to be successful, and that any lack of success is therefore a personal failure (see section 2, chapter VII). As a consequence, activists encourage farmers to take their despair to the streets rather than kill themselves. A third level of movement engagement is that the movement actors in Vidarbha actively use the rhetoric of the suicides to emphasize the suffering of farmers. They nearly unanimously agree with the academic and public discourses around the 'farmer suicides' and talk about them to prove how the government neglects them.

Movement actors increasingly understand the widespread suicides as a direct, though very different, successor of earlier forms of movements. Some even see it as a 'silent' movement in itself. I argue that if not the suicides themselves, then the rhetoric surrounding them and the various levels of engagement with them have become an important part of the activism in Vidarbha. For farmers, activists and leaders on the

ground, as well as for journalists and researchers, the phenomenon of farmer suicides serves as a prominent and emotional issue that can help movement actors to politicise neoliberal economic policies, the mysterious forces of the market. It opens up a space to talk about the implications of capitalist agriculture and especially neoliberal policies for farmers, to discuss the darker sides of the dominant development narrative. The radical act of farmers taking their own lives makes their suffering tangible. The suicides or the rhetoric around them can therefore be understood as part of the movement in Vidarbha. It is a movement though, which is – as I argued repeatedly – characterized by a certain powerlessness and inability to capture the new realities of farmers who are caught between neoliberal policies and old structures.

5 Ideas about the Future of Agriculture

The 'agrarian crisis' is an Indian phenomenon, but neoliberal policies affect rural areas and agricultural production in large regions of the globe. In this context, local and transnational movements have emerged to add new ideas about the future of agriculture. This brings me to the last research sub-question, namely to *understand what frames the involved actors use to construct long–term visions for agriculture, how these ideas differ between actors and how they relate to other ideas* (see chapter VI).

When analysing the ideas and demands of farmers and movement leaders in Vidarbha, I found that they can be grouped, to some extent, into four different frames. These frames group the actors' ideas and demands about understanding the present situation as well as about envisioning alternatives. The distinction of these four frames allowed to analyse the tensions between the groups as well as the tensions immanent in all the groups' main demand for a better price for agricultural produce.

The *'protection' frame* represents the idea that the farmers should receive support and care from the government. It is the most prevalent and most important frame for actors from all groups, for activists, leaders as well as supporters. These ideas are most central for AIKS, whose supporters demand a strong state. In contrast, the *'free market' frame* sees the free market as the solution. It corresponds to a vision for the future of agriculture based on neoliberal capitalism. While this vision is dominant among policy-making bodies, it finds hardly any resonance among movement supporters. Only a few activists and leaders of SSS occasionally argue within this frame, though inconsistently.

The *'self-help' frame* instead concentrates on solutions for farmers to become more self-reliable. Self-help becomes important because neither the market nor the state is perceived to be able or willing to provide support in the short-term. This frame is especially important for KAA and their focus on low input agriculture. Interestingly, they frame this kind of low input – or organic – agriculture not as an ecological alternative in the first place, but rather as a solution for farmers not to depend on input markets. Finally, the *'alternatives' frame* contains new ideas and solutions that question the contemporary capitalist system of agriculture. This frame is important mostly for

activists and leaders from VJAS, KAA, the journalists and single activists, who all propose alternatives that can be very different from each other.

Tensions in the Price Demand

The groups' main demand is for a remunerative price for agricultural produce. For the movement actors – particularly the supporters – this is the main demand that unites all the different groups. They often argue that the demand for a remunerative price remained the same since the 1970s. But in fact while the demand has stayed the same, the frame in which this demand is raised changed. The earlier New Farmers' Movements, namely *Shetkari Sanghatana,* argued within the 'free-market' frame. But most of the contemporary groups that have the same demand, argue within the 'protection' frame. They claim that the government is supposed to guarantee a remunerative price and protect farmers from the market.

The movement actors put the demand towards the state for a remunerative price at centre stage. With this, they invoke four major tensions, which mirror the contradictions immanent in the 'protection' frame. The first contradiction concerns the Minimum Support Prices (MSPs). The MSP is supposed to guarantee that the government will step into the breach, if the market price falls below a certain limit. Many movement actors imagine that this price must make agriculture a viable activity for all farmers. This then means for them that it must compensate farmers differently according to their region, irrigation facilities or land holdings. Movement actors thereby question the mechanisms of price determination by markets radically, arguably more radically than they realize. The second tension concerns the fact that higher prices for agricultural products are a double-edged sword for farmers. Because most of them – particularly the small and marginal farmers – are net-food consumers, increasing food prices affect them adversely. The third tension is that guaranteed prices are generally demanded only for agricultural products, but not for agricultural labour. The farmers I interviewed have a fine nose for power inequalities in input and output markets. In sharp contrast, most of them ignore those power inequalities within the agricultural labour market, where they suddenly seem to trust the market mechanisms.

A fourth contradiction is the absence of the land question. For the so-called old peasant movements, land reforms were the main demand. Land reforms have been an integral part of the first set of policies after independence, but have never been implemented (except in some regions). Therefore, rural inequality has persisted. Surprisingly then, the possibility or even desirability of a land redistribution hardly reverberate in contemporary farmer movement groups. Land reforms are not deemed important even among supporters and activists of the *All India Kisan Sabha* (the CPI(M) peasant wing). This point is very important against the backdrop of the rise in the number of small and marginal landholdings and their unprofitability.

These tensions point again to the issue of who is, or is perceived to be, affected by the 'agrarian crisis'. These last three tensions show the striking absence of the issues of the most marginalized rural people, namely the landless or people of low caste. But the first

tension – immanent in the movement actors' own definition of a Minimum Support Price – has the potential to question the idea of a united peasantry. Beyond that, this definition can possibly challenge ideas of a neoliberal, capitalist agriculture in general. Clearly, demanding a higher MSP without fundamentally changing its calculation would again increase inequality. A higher MSP would probably still not make farming profitable for marginal to medium farmers, while the large landholders could instead earn large profits. Most of the groups' constituencies would therefore be on the losing end of such a proposition. Nevertheless, movement actors demanded a differentiated price that needed to make farming viable for *all* farmers. I showed that with this demand, movement actors suggested to change how the price mechanism works. This would necessitate a fundamental rethinking relations of production and consumption.

Food Sovereignty and the 'Peasantry' at Risk

The prominence of the price demand risks to hide away the many ideas that movement actors bring forward. Many of those ideas closely relate to concepts of food sovereignty, particularly ideas of those groups that rely on the 'self-help' frame. They try to improve the situation through 'constructive work', by developing local initiatives and ideas to improve the farmers' immediate problems. But interestingly, the interviewees hardly ever consider ideas within the 'self-help' frame as long-term solutions. Instead they see these ideas as an stopgap in the absence of government assistance. In their minds, long-term solutions only become thinkable once the state provides basic protection and livelihood security. This points to one of the shortcomings of the food sovereignty concept: the state's role is highly unclear, as Bernstein (2014) argued.

In the 'alternative' frame as well, ideas directly relate to the food sovereignty concept. In this frame, a heavy critique of neoliberal policies and (transnational) companies goes together with localised solutions like low input farming or locally adapted crops as well as visions of more fundamental changes. Consequently, some of the 'alternative' frame ideas also face the same criticism as the food sovereignty concept. This critique culminates in the question of how to envision resistance against the neoliberal system without reifying the concept of a united 'peasantry' and thereby neglecting structural inequalities.

I could show that such multi-class struggles, which include large sections of the 'peasantry', can be important for fighting the neoliberal policies that farmers face. This study therefore serves as an empirical example from India, supporting the argument Petras and Veltmeyer (2011) have made for Latin America. The small and medium farmers of Vidarbha – the constituency of the groups – are not at all on the winning side of these neoliberal developments. Therefore, their mobilizations can be seen as part of a multitude of localized struggles and micro-movements across India. They are different in their location and their demands, but their constituencies face the same macro reality of being adversely affected by the capitalist system. Despite the inequalities and differences between and within these groups and struggles, they are important to make the consequences of neoliberal policies visible and to resist them. In consequence, the

idea of a united peasantry that is rather strong in all movement groups, *can* be supportive for their struggle.

At the same time, I have repeatedly argued that the understanding of the 'agrarian crisis' as threatening the entire peasantry equally is misleading. Such a mobilizing ideology of a united peasantry risks glossing over deep class and caste divisions. Rich farmers with surplus to sell need such an ideology of presenting the entire village 'community' as a victim of the state. Only in this way can they obtain the support of the majority of poorer farmers and landless workers to demand subsidies and higher prices instead of land reforms, for example. I argued in this thesis, that such ideas may even contribute to the rise of communalist forces, particularly when they are based on a contemporized agrarian myth and make references to 'traditional' societies.

The earlier New Farmers' Movements in India used this rhetoric very prominently. It is often argued that by doing so, they in fact exacerbated the rise of Hindutva forces in several states. In the case of Maharashtra, however, *Shetkari Sanghatana* played a different role. *Shetkari Sanghatana* is perceived as having taken up an aggressive reformist approach and having been an active counterforce to reactionary Hindu nationalism. In the contemporary movement around the 'agrarian crisis' in Vidarbha, this looks very different for the different groups. BKS is very openly part of the communalist forces. SSS has a strong rhetoric of the united peasantry. VJAS makes many references to the 'traditional' society. I argue that for these two groups, the argument that they helped the rise of Hindutva is convincing. For KAA and AIKS, such an accusation would be highly inaccurate. They understand it as one of their main tasks to be a bulwark against these very forces.

To conclude, the tensions between the different rural classes are immanent in the groups' demands for a higher price for the agricultural produce. At the same time, the higher price guaranteed by the state seems to be the major vision for the future of farming. It is quite surprising to note that a number of movement actors had internalised the neoclassical view of agriculture even if they explicitly demanded state intervention. Arguably, these tensions are symptomatic of the almost total absence of systemic alternatives (with notable exceptions). It underscores the need for new ideas and thorough analysis to resist neoliberal capitalism without falling back onto the romanticized notion of a 'united peasantry'.

6 Negotiating with the State and Thinking Alternatives

For the movement actors and farmers, the forces of the market seem mysterious yet determining, and the forces of the state seem unreachable. This remains a major obstacle in the struggles of the movement actors in Vidarbha. All the more, the groups are very creative in finding strategies to challenge these seemingly unreachable forces. They are quite successful in elaborating solutions for their specific issues, i.e. the low prices for their products or the high costs for inputs. Interestingly, the groups chose two very different strategies, being aware of the innate difficulties in both of them. Some

movement groups chose to start at the local level with 'constructive' work. They want to first strengthen grassroots resistance, and then grasp power to realize their own alternatives. Other groups believe that such local initiatives are merely an attempt to bedazzle farmers. Rather, the policies need to be changed first in order to enable local solutions.

This leads to the question of the impact of those movement groups on different levels. First and arguably foremost, the movement groups and activists support or encourage the farmers in difficult situations. The relief is temporary and the successes that activists and leaders together with their supporters are able to achieve are small. But they are meaningful for farmers and motivate them to struggle. However, the responses by the state failed to tackle the root causes. Many movement actors were aware of that. Arguably, the capitalist project in an electoral democracy cannot afford to marginalize the farmers completely. Therefore, the government tries to respond to some of the farmers' claims. This response though is only very partial, in order to prevent a more radical resistance from growing. How ridiculous state support can be, becomes evident in the government's compensation for 'real' farmer suicides. Against this backdrop, it is rather surprising that both of the above strategies eventually target the state. Even more, it is striking that there was no discussion about the decision-making process and the distribution of resources once a certain power towards the state would be achieved (see section 3, chapter VI).

What these movement groups could do, though, is very important in the context of the new economic policies in India. These small movement groups are unable to avert the implications of the neoliberal policies per se. But they have helped to create awareness on the ground about political developments and to politicize the farmers' conditions. By engaging in the discourses around farmer suicides and the 'agrarian crisis', they give some farmers an opportunity to reflect on the structural reasons for the crisis they face, and thus to question the dominant neoliberal paradigm of development. On the one hand then, these many small groups all over India or even the world can be an important part of challenging the current development paradigm. On the other hand, though, they fail to tackle questions of state power and to fully politicise the mysterious forces of the market. This prevents them from forming alliances or platforms that combine a broader range of interests. It makes it difficult to bring forward visions that can truly challenge the core workings of neoliberalism.

The transnational movements of farmers are arguably a chance to change that. But similar to the heterogeneous movement around the 'agrarian crisis' in Vidharba, they struggle to find an ideology that can lead the struggle of the 'peasantry' while at the same time acknowledging the very different material interests of the different groups within this category. This thesis shows that listening to the voices of those that are adversely affected by the capitalist system is indispensable when questioning this very system and its development paradigm. At the same time, I show the importance of analysing the fine-grained structures of power and interests within the movement

groups that make these voices heard, and the importance of looking closely for whom they are speaking.

7 Digging Deeper

This thesis contributes to a more nuanced understanding of farmers' agency within the 'agrarian crisis' and of their frames of reference for the present and the future. It has taken a perspective from within these movement groups, but it also points to those inequalities within the villages that are not addressed by the movement groups. To understand what such movement groups mean for the excluded (namely, women, people belonging to ST or SC communities or agricultural labour) would provide interesting insights into their impact on rural society.

With respect to visions for a future of agriculture, it would help to understand the impact of neoliberal policies on those groups who do not express themselves through these movement groups and to listen to their ideas for the future. This would also shed light on how the ideas of these disadvantaged and marginalized groups relate to the notions of food sovereignty that have become so prominent.

Connected to this, it would be crucial to understand how concepts like food sovereignty develop and become widespread, and what the influence of such small movement groups like those in marginal areas of India can have on this process. In particular, it would be interesting to learn if and how the many ambivalences that emerge are included in such concepts.

I have shown that many people are disappointed by the state and by politicians but still believe in the state and in democracy. They struggle to find a political space to make their voices heard. It would be interesting to analyse these discourses from a historical perspective in India or other democratic states.

Last but not least, the peculiar role of land deserves further attention. Why is the unequal distribution of land a non-issue for many of the groups I studied? Why has land become so important for the rich farmers and corporations, while the poor feel unable to use it profitably for agricultural cultivation? It would be extremely interesting to study this in the context of India's role in the global rush for land, as the country is leasing land in other countries and continents, purportedly to cope with coming food shortages.

8 A Bleak Future

Most of the fieldwork for the present study was done prior to 2014. In 2014, the Hindu-nationalist, right-wing Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) won the national elections and the state elections in Maharashtra. The rivalling Congress Party had ruled both India and Maharashtra for the last decade and was perceived as utterly corrupt. Some movement actors had supported the BJP just because they felt that it might do better than the

Congress. When I went back to Vidarbha in early 2015, the movement actors were divided in their interpretation of this new government in relation to the 'agrarian crisis'. In 2017, the situation with regards to the agrarian crisis has further deteriorated and protests have grown big[86].

Opposing or Being Co-opted?

Some movement actors, namely AIKS and KAA, have strongly opposed the BJP from the start and see their work as a bulwark against communalist forces. Activist Vijay Jawandhia, a strong critic, was quoted in an article in the newspaper *The Hindu* as saying that *"the BJP is now totally bypassing the issue of loan waiver or MSP* [Minimum Support Price]*"*[87]. There are, in fact, a number of reasons why farmers can be unhappy with the BJP-Sena government. But before getting to that, I come to VJAS and SSS, which both became part of the BJP-Sena government.

Kishor Tiwari of VJAS, who had been openly supportive of the BJP, also expressed his deep disappointment with the new government in 2015. In the above article, he said that "*the BJP has backtracked on the assurance of loan waiver and considering higher MSP. (…) The farmer is crying for a bailout package but there is no talk of that."*[88] A short while later, though, he was named as chairman of the *Vasantrao Naik Sheti Swavlamban Mission* and now also holds the status of a Minister of State. Arguably he was rewarded for his activism, which draws a lot of media attention, as well as for his loyalty to BJP/RSS forces. The Mission was set up by the government to find solutions for the 'agrarian crisis' and suggest measures against the staggering numbers of farmer suicides. By its own account, the mission proposes new crop loans to all farmers in the 14 districts that they are in charge of – "*in a bid to arrest suicides*"[89]. Even after his appointment, Tiwari conceded that the government's efforts had not yielded results. But according to an article in *The Indian Express*, he also promised that *"we [the mission] have launched a number of schemes to halt the suicides of farmers in Marathwada and other parts of the state."*[90] In the present research, Tiwari had strongly argued using the three frames of 'protection', 'self-help' and 'alternatives', while emphasizing strongly the two latter ones. Until now, his rhetoric has not changed much yet. But since Tiwari is now part of the government and fully stands behind Modi, it will be interesting to see how this develops[91].

The activists and leaders of SSS in Vidarbha had – and still have – many doubts about cooperating with the BJP-Sena government even after the 2015 election. All the same, SSS has become an official BJP ally. In July 2016, SSS leader Sadabhau Khot became the

[86] See the issue "Farmers' Revolt" of Frontline (July 2017) or more specifically on Vidarbha see Times of India (2017)

[87] Rashid (2015) in the newspaper *The Hindu*

[88] Rashid (2015) in the newspaper *The Hindu*

[89] See government homepage http://vnss-mission.gov.in/ (accessed 2016/09/03)

[90] More (2016) in *The Indian Express*

[91] More (2016) in *The Indian Express*

Minister of State for agriculture, horticulture and marketing in the BJP-Sena government of Maharashtra. SSS leader Ravikanth Tupkar became Maharashtra Textile Corporation Chairman, a Minister of State[92]. It will be interesting to see if and how Tupkar's frame will change. In the interviews analysed in this thesis, Tupkar had argued in the 'protection' as well as the 'free market'-frame and strongly blamed the government, which was at that time controlled by the Indian National Congress. Additionally, Tupkar's role in the movement around the 'agrarian crisis' as well as the farmers' perceptions of him might strongly change now that he has become a 'political leader'.

Here, it is worth citing from the suicide note of a farmer in Washim who took his life in September 2015. He expresses that "*we [kisans] are not afraid of drought, we are tired of the rulers' apathy*". He is directly addressing the current Maharashtra Chief Minister Devendra Fadnavis, member of BJP and RSS: "*You are a highly educated leader from Vidarbha and therefore we always backed you. (…) We believed you will have a better understanding of farmers' issues in Vidarbha. However, one gets the feeling that you are deliberately ignoring their problems."*[93] How the new power constellation with BJP in the government will change both VJAS' as well as SSS' mobilization strategies, and particularly the farmers' perceptions of them, remains to be seen.

Deteriorating Situation

When I talked to movement actors again in 2015, often informally, most were disappointed or even terrified by these new political developments. On a discursive level, many movement actors' demands and arguments rely on the notion of a united peasantry and therefore indirectly risk contributing to the rise of such communalist forces. But on the level of actual policies there are many reasons for the movement actors to be disappointed.

First, the climate for political activism outside Hindu-nationalist organisations of the *sangh parivar* is becoming harsher. Many activists – even those who still supported the BJP to some extent – reported their deep concern over the rapidly growing violence coming from communalist forces. At the time of my last visit, Communist Party of India leader Govind Pansare was shot in the Maharashtrian city of Kolhapur and died from his injuries. Activists and leaders all expressed their solidarity with him and strongly opposed this violence by organising agitations and strikes. In their eyes, the violence was directed against social activists per se and was coming from a Hindu-nationalist direction. An activist from the left (AIKS) detailed the repression against activists and worsening of the farmers' situation. Then he said that the motivation of people to fight and participate in the movement would also become stronger these days. And that there was still hope.

Second, farmers' dreams of a profitable agriculture were dealt a further blow. Narendra Modi, now the Prime Minister of India, construed himself as a farmer-friendly politician

[92] See government homepage http://www.mstc.co.in (accessed 2016/09/03)

[93] Lokhande (2015) in the newspaper *dna*, news website Rediff (2015)

during the election campaign. Many activists said they had supported Modi because he promised during rallies in Maharashtra to give better prices to the farmers and guarantee them 50% profit. Movement actors said that Modi has even given this promise in writing in a letter to Maharashtrian SSS leader Raju Shetti. In the budgets since the elections, Modi's government has broken these promises[94]. Once in power, Modi dissolved the National Planning Commission and replaced it by the National Institution for Transforming India (NITI) Commission. With this, he dissolved the one institution that could to some extent satisfy the demands of the movement groups for a remunerative price. That move made it clear once more that the government is supporting the advancement of the neoliberalization of agriculture and the withdrawal of the state.

The newspaper *The Hindu* reported that in the 2015 season, the prices the farmers earned were significantly lower than the year before, both the MSPs and the market prices. Additionally, the yields were short of expectations. In 2017, the yields were rather high in many areas, but demonetisation policies[95] of the Modi government have affected farmers disastrously. They caused prices to plummet and the rural economy to fall in a state of panic[96]. In response to these developments, the BJP-led Maharashtra and other state governments announced several relief packages including loan waivers. But many farmers are not even entitled to such loan waivers[97].

The third point is land. Before 2014, many movement actors said that land was not an issue for them. They even said that the profit from agriculture for small farmers would be so small that labourers would be even better off than landowning farmers. But in 2015, land had become the most important issue. The reason is the new government's Land Bill (i.e. the Right to Fair Compensation and Transparency in Land Acquisition, Rehabilitation and Resettlement (Amendment) Bill 2015). This bill severely cuts the rights of landowners when the government or private entities want to acquire land for industrial projects or infrastructure projects, including public-private partnerships (see section 3.2, chapter VI). The movement actors in Vidarbha were enraged about this new act and organized protests. This shows that land is still an important factor in rural wealth, or at least that it stands between farmers and even more severe levels of poverty. Movement actors reasoned that until now, the government just refused to pay remunerative prices and allowed dispossession by debt to intensify. But now the government has even got the right to take their land. Land that was all they still had to support themselves.

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[94] See Panwar (2015) in the magazine *Frontline*, Rashid (2015) in the newspaper *The Hindu*

[95] On 8th November 2016, the Government of India announced the immediate demonetisation of all Rs 500 and Rs 1000 banknotes. This meant that four hours after this announcement, these banknotes became invalid. In the days following the demonetisation, the country faced severe cash shortages with severe detrimental effects across the economy.

[96] See Ramakrishnan and Tripathi (2017) in *Frontline*

[97] See Katakam (2015) in the magazine *Frontline*

In 2017, these developments have worsened again and considerably. The political and social climate is becoming even harsher. An important case in point is the increasing violence against *dalits* that too often goes unpunished. Connecting to the last point above, it is crucial to note that a high number of these attacks on *dalits* happen because of land conflicts, i.e. when *dalits* acquire land and their ownership is disputed by upper caste villagers. Land therefore, is a hot issue also in these conflicts[98]. Then, large regions of India faced a severe drought in 2016 after two consecutive years of weak monsoons and a drought in 2012. Within Maharashtra 28,000 villages were affected; Marathwada and Western Vidarbha were particularly troubled[99]. When the monsoons finally came, they came late and were so excessive that in several parts of Maharashtra, the lower lands faced flood-like situations – also in Vidarbha[100]. The drought and its devastating effects on many farmers is surely a combination of human-made and natural disasters[101]. But the difficult situation has been exacerbated by certain measures, including demonetisation and the ban on the sale of cattle for slaughter in Maharashtra. In addition to the many other – often violent – impacts, this ban threatens to push farmers into deepening distress. Prices of cattle have fallen drastically. Farmers who are in trouble due to bad harvests often need to sell their animals. They might need to sell them to get money to survive, or because they can no longer feed or water the animals. Farmers used to sell their cattle in a drought year to butchers and buy new ones when their earnings rose after monsoon. If that cycle is broken, it leaves farmers with little money to buy inputs for the next agricultural season.[102]

A farmer who committed suicide in 1997 wrote in his suicide note: "*I wish the government paid attention to our woes*"[103]. Now, nearly twenty years later, many farmers feel that the government is still not listening. In 2014, the BJP very successfully ran a "*high-pitched Assembly election campaign against the Congress-NCP regime on farm suicides*"[104]. As a reaction to accusations that this government is not easing the farmers' plight either, the Maharashtra government issued more relief packages and ordered another survey to find the reasons for the suicides[105] – as if those were not sufficiently known already. At the same time, the farmer suicides and the talk about them finds no end. In the whole of 2015, 3228 farmers across Maharashtra – mostly Vidarbha and Marathwada – committed suicide. This is the highest number since 2001[106].

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[98] According to different newspaper articles based on official data (Mishra 2016 in *The Week*, Namala 2016 in *The Indian Express*, Couderé 2016 in *The Diplomat*)

[99] Article in *The Indian Express* (2016a), and *The Guardian* (2016b)

[100] Article in *The Indian Express* (2016b)

[101] Sharma (2016) in *The Huffington Post* or most famously Sainath (1996)

[102] Jadhav (2016) in *Reuters*, Biswas (2016) in *The Indian Express* and Rashid (2016) in *The Hindu*

[103] Blog of the journalist Jaideep Hardikar (2015)

[104] Rashid (2015) in *The Hindu*

[105] See Rashid (2015) in *The Hindu*

[106] Deshpande (2016) in *The Hindu*

Farmers' revolt?

In 2017, the situation has deteriorated fast and the farmers' frustrations about the current government are deep. Indeed, large-scale protests started in June in different places of the country, including Vidarbha. The protests include assemblies, marches, blockades and strikes, i.e. refusal to commence cultivation or to deliver their produce to the markets[107]. AIKS is strongly advocating these protests in Maharashtra, cooperating with many other groups. Also SSS leader Raju Shetti is one of the leaders of the protest, now publicly repenting for having enlisted farmers' support for BJP[108].

It is too early to know what further emerges from this farmers' revolt. Based on my study, I do see two reasons for hope for the case of Vidarbha. One reason is the diversity of farmers' voices that manifest in a heterogeneous movement and the many creative ways of resistance. They have the potential to serve as one cornerstone of a larger movement, of larger associations to emerge. Second, the policy assault of the new government on agriculture, land and on other social issues is so big that it triggered larger mobilisation of rural people, including farmers, on several occasions. This raises the hope that in coming days, movement actors may see a heightened need to cooperate and include different interests. May be one or more of the frames laid out in this thesis may spread and become more amenable to others, thereby hinting at bigger movements. I believe that activists and activist-scholars in India and elsewhere will and can contribute to struggles against above-mentioned developments – be it neoliberal capitalist policies or the rise of communalist right-wing forces. I am optimistic that the activists and farmers in Vidarbha will creatively continue to resist the forces that exploit them and fight for what is worth fighting for.

[107] Chandrasekhar (2017) in *Frontline*

[108] Krishnan (2017) in *Frontline*

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X. Annex

1 Interview guidelines supporters

Topic	Entry	Points to be touched / underlying assumptions
Profile:	– Name – Age – Education – Family members in this household – Main/alternative income sources – How many animals – How many acres → irrigated or rain-fed – Religion/caste	

Please tell me about your agricultural activities.	– What crops do you grow?
	  o Do you have good yields? → Why?
	  o Do you get good prices for your crops? → Why?
	  o Do you hire any labourers?
	– Is it the same for your neighbours / other villagers?
	– Has it changed in the recent years?
	– This is a district where many peasants commit suicide.
	  o What do you think about this?
	  o Why do they do that?
		– Main problems (prices, hunger, employment, oppression…)
		– Change over time
		– Reasons (state, market, system…)

Do you think anything can be done about this? Who could help you?	– According to the answers above – Who is responsible for this situation? Why? How? – Where do you go if you have problems, need support? – Do you think that your situation can change in future? o Why? How? By whom?	Solutions in short run (what, who) Parties, NGOs… Micro public spheres

Are you part of a group or do you join any activities? Why (not)?	– Do you know about any groups or leaders or parties that try to help you?
	  o How did you get to know them?
	  o What do you think about them?
	  o What do they do?
	  o Do they work together? Why?
	– Do you take part in any of these groups?
	  o Why? Why this particular group?
	  o Since when?
	  o What exactly do/did you do?
	  o How much time do you spend in these activities?
	  o (How) do you try to convince others to participate?
	  o How can you profit? Any successes of the movement?
	– Do you know anybody (else) who is part?
	  o Why are they part?
	  o (Why you not?)
	  o Women?
	  o Labour?
	  o Small/middle/large peasants?
		Political parties, rallies…
		
		Part because of?
		
		– tradition
		– personal contacts
		– family
		– conviction
		
		Not part because?
		
		– No hope, opportunities
		– Leader
		– Time, money…
		– Other groups (caste identity)
		
		Strategies to convince them?

What is your vision about development?	– If you could choose, what would you do for a living? o If prices for agriculture would be higher, would you like to stay a peasant / in the village? – If you were CM of Maharashtra, how would Buldhana/Yavatmal/Wardha look like in 10 years? What would you do?	

2 Interview guidelines activists

Topic	Entry	Points to be touched / underlying assumptions
Can you tell me about your group, about who is in your group, what your strategies are?	– What are your current activities? – How do you implement this? What do you do day after day? – How do you communicate with the peasants? – With whom are you in contact? How? Media? – Do you coordinate your activities with other groups? Why (not)?	– Active, passive – Other groups (collaborators, opponents, reasons) – Rallies, demonstrations… – Negotiations, litigations… – Media (who, how) – Successes
Why is it that some peasants are part of your group, others are difficult to mobilise?	– Who is coming to your events? Why? – Who do you want to come? – Do you think other groups are more successful? Why?	– Members, supporters (gender, caste, class, region) – Part because of? – tradition – personal contacts – family – conviction – How to reach them, keep in touch Not part because? – No hope, opportunities – Leader – Time, money… – Other groups (caste identity) – Strategies to convince them?

Is it difficult to win other people for your cause (e.g. government officials, journalists or urban people)?	– Whom do you tell about the problems of the peasants? – How do you make them listen? – How do they react to you? – Some people say, that having such a small peasant basis is not enough to speak in the name… – Why did you personally decide to get involved with the rural poor?	– State (who, how) – Media (who, how) – Urban people – International groups
Please tell me about the situation of the rural people of Vidarbha	– How would Vidarbha look like in 10 years if you were in power? End: ask about the basic data of the group and the person, if not mentioned already.	– Main problems (prices, hunger, employment, oppression) – Change over time – Reasons (state, market, system) – Solutions in short run (what, who)